

THE
NIECE OF
ESTHER
LYNNE

E·EVERETT-
GREEN



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THE NIECE OF ESTHER LYNNE



The Niece of Esther Lynne

By

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Author of

“Where there’s a Will,” “Olivia’s Experiment,”

“Dare Lorimer’s Heritage,” etc.

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THE NIECE OF ESTHER LYNNE:

The Old Style and the New

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CHAPTER I

CONVERGING THREADS

"WHAT next?" asked Esther Lynne softly of herself, as she stood in the mild February sunshine, looking out with dreamy eyes over the fair prospect before her. "I wonder what next."

The frost had gone, the crisp blanket of snow had vanished, the keen chill of the north wind no longer numbed ungloved hands. The voice of the birds gave joyful welcome to the first breath of spring-tide; snowdrops and aconites made lines of gold and silver along the garden borders. The leaves of the daffodils were pushing eagerly upwards. All Nature seemed to know that the long, dark winter was over and gone, and that however uncertain and tardy her footsteps, sweet Spring was coming towards them—the music of her advancing tread was already in the air. And Esther Lynne, standing in the warm, sheltered garden of Convent House, looked out into the sunshine around her, and up into the blue of the clear, cloud-flecked sky, and asked herself—what next?

It was a question which was natural to her at such a time. Her life's task had ended towards the close of the last year. The father, whose long, long decline she had watched over

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with tireless tenderness through a period of more years than she could well count, lay at rest beneath the churchyard sod. Now she ruled alone the small domain which for a quarter of a century she had ruled in his name. All was hers—the quaint old-world house, the ancient garden, with its deep velvet turf, its ancient sun-dial, its hoary walls and curious chain of fish-ponds. There was no rough uprooting of her life; no need for her to seek new ties in a new home. Outwardly all was as it had ever been, and Esther Lynne's world was rejoicing for her in the new-found liberty which would at last be hers. She felt herself that they were saying how thankful she must be for the release which had come to the failing invalid and to herself. Thankful in measure she was.

The burden of long sickness and slowly-increasing infirmity is hard to bear, and the aged father's increasing dependence upon her, and his inability to distinguish night from day, or to gauge the length of time he kept her at his side, had made life for her during the last year of his life a burden which had told perceptibly upon her. Two years ago her soft abundant hair had been scarcely more than tinged with grey, now it was altogether silver; and of late she had begun to wear over it a little filmy lace covering, which perhaps seemed to add to her years as much as the bleaching of her locks: Yet the face had retained much of its soft youthful tinting, though the long strain showed itself at last in the tiny wrinkles round the eyes, and in sundry lines which told of watching and weariness. Her heavy burden had from the first been borne in patience and in unfailing tenderness. And yet, now that the strain had been removed, now that Esther Lynne was free to take up her life and make of it what she would, she was chiefly conscious of the immense blank that had come to her. She had lived almost entirely for one object, and now that object was taken away. What was there to put in its place?

A clear, young voice suddenly hailed her from some unseen spot. Next moment a girl, brandishing a hockey-stick, dashed

into view. She wore strong boots and gaiters, and skirts only to her ankles, and she leapt nimbly over a little low wall and landed in the midst of a flower border, where, luckily, nothing had as yet pushed its way above ground.

"Oh, gracious!" cried the youthful hoyden, as she found her heavy boots well caked with soil, "I'd forgotten this blessed border; thought it was a path or something. Don't scold me, there's a dear! I'll not do it again—till next time! I'm off to hockey on the common, and I found I'd two gaiter buttons off. I knew you'd sew 'em on for me if I asked. I hadn't time to go round by the road proper-like. I just crossed by the stepping-stones, and made a bee-line through the garden. You don't mind, do you?"

"It's not much good minding what you do, Sally," answered Esther, smiling indulgently; for the Squire's younger daughter was a privileged person through all Cleethorpe. She was not pretty; she was not clever; and she spent the bulk of her time in playing games, in which she certainly excelled. Many people shook their heads at her exploits, Esther Lynne amongst them; but for all that, Sally was possessed of a warm heart and the open, candid nature which goes far to win affection. And as she sat before the fire, watching Esther's deft fingers occupied upon her gaiter (it did not seem to occur to her to offer to do the work herself), she suddenly blurted out words which Esther well knew were the expression of the feelings of the neighbourhood, though only Sally would have dared to voice them to her.

"Doesn't it seem awfully queer to you to be able to do what you like now? I do think it's been a shame—well, you know what I mean, Miss Lynne—a dreadful thing for you—the way you've never been able to please yourself all these years. I should have a good bust now if I were you!"

"My dear Sally!"

"Oh, I know it's not the way you'd put it; but that's how I feel about it. I'd like to hear you were going round the

world (I'll come with you like a shot if you'll say the word !), or were going to take a flat in London and have a good old orgy of gaiety, or do something really larky and amusing."

"My dear ! At such a time as this ?"

"Oh, I know you're in deep mourning now ; and so are we all, in a way. Poor dear old Queen ! Of course, things have got to be a bit dull for a few months. But that won't last. Spring will soon be here ; and we shall be able to be jolly again ! Now, Miss Lynne, do think about it ! Do have a good time, just for once in a way ! There are ten thousand things one might do ! I'll help you with some ideas !"

"Thank you, dear ; but I am afraid perhaps your ideas might be a little too modern for me. You see, I have stood still all these years, whilst the world has been going forward. I think I shall be happiest in my own little corner. And, indeed, I shall be glad to have more time to help poor little Stella over her parish affairs. She has her hands much too full."

"I should think so, indeed ! Stella is in a drive and a fuss from morning till night. But she won't be helped, Miss Lynne. You'll see. She's just bent on worrying herself to fiddle-strings. It's a disease with her. She's made that way. She must have her finger in every pie. You'll see, nobody can help her"

"Well, dear, we will see what we can do. Stella's hands are much too full, and there are things which would be better done by an older person which she has been forced to attempt herself. I hope I may be able to give her more help now. We shall see. I sometimes wonder that you do not try to be a little more useful, Sally dear. You have so much strength and energy, and it seems rather a pity—does it not ?—to spend it all playing games."

"Now, don't you lecture me, Miss Lynne !" cried Sally, springing to her feet, with a laugh, and possessing herself of the now completed gaiter. "I mean to have my fun whilst I'm

young. I'll tone down and be as good as you like when I get old ! I've got a vow in heaven (isn't that the right place for 'em ?) to give up hockey at thirty and my bicycle at forty ; and then I'll have a sweet little cap like yours, and I hope my hair will be white, and I'll copy every single thing you do, and be a real old-world person."

"Oh, Sally, Sally, what a rattlepate you are ! No, my dear, do not make vows or think you can block your life out into periods like that. Be your own young, happy self as long as God gives you health and spirits ; but remember, even whilst you are young, that life is a sort of sacred trust, of which we shall have to give account. Enjoy your youth and your play with all your heart ; but do not let life be all games, all play. We all have duties growing up around our path. Do not let those duties be neglected. And now, off with you to your game ! You did not come here to be lectured, I am sure. But you were twenty-one at Christmas, remember, Sally ! You are not an 'infant' any longer."

"Gracious, no ! And having just escaped the bondage of long clothes, I'm bound to have *my* bust !" cried the incorrigible Sally, as she dashed away in all the exuberant vitality of her irresponsible girlhood.

Esther Lynne looked after her with a smile and a sigh, asking softly of herself, "Was I ever young—like that ?"

In a great, cool bungalow, far away in the dusty plains of India, three men were gathered together in pleasant idleness, and were talking of past, present, and future.

The eldest of the three was a fine-looking man, who was approaching his sixtieth year. His face was deeply bronzed with exposure to the climate, and his hair had turned white, though the brows over the rather deep-set eyes, and the long moustache upon his otherwise clean-shaven face were still densely black, and gave a distinctive appearance to the countenance, somewhat disguising its age. The features

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were good, and if cast in rather a stern mould, the sternness was greatly counterbalanced by the kindliness of the eyes, and by the genial courtesy of manner and bearing. Sir Humphrey Vanborough had long been one of the best-known men in Bengal; a Judge of Appeal, a K.S.I., a man whose career had been distinguished from first to last. His name had been one to conjure with through many years and throughout a wide area; and now when the time had come for him to retire and return home—or go whithersoever he listed—there was a strong feeling of regret in many quarters, and it was openly said that his place would be hard to fill.

The youngest of the trio was a young fellow, a kinsman of his, bearing his name. Archibald Vanborough had only recently arrived at man's estate; and after having closed his college career, had eagerly accepted his kinsman's invitation to come out to him, and do some shooting, see the country, and take a trip to Kashmir, before accompanying Sir Humphrey home to England. The lad had spent the cold weather in Sir Humphrey's roomy and pleasant bungalow, had shot tigers, and seen a drive of elephants, and done many of those things dear to the heart of England's youth. Now they were talking of going farther afield, and were, in fact, only waiting till Colonel York should be fit to move, before taking their leisurely journey towards the pleasant hill country, from whence they could gradually visit all such places of interest as Sir Humphrey had planned to show his younger companion.

The third man of the company lay extended upon a couch, pale with the pallor of long illness, thin to attenuation, his face bearing the impress of grievous suffering, which, though now for the most part a thing of the past, had set a mark upon him which would never be altogether effaced.

Colonel York—he had just received brevet rank, though he would never be fit for active service again—had distinguished himself by conspicuous gallantry during the border warfare, which has been so constant along the Indian frontiers,

Grievously wounded, and carried off for dead, he had, nevertheless, made a painful and tedious recovery; and this recovery was mainly due to the fact that Sir Humphrey Vanborough, happening to be in the neighbourhood of the regimental quarters, and hearing of the desperate condition of the young Major (as he was then), had interested himself warmly in the case, and had with great difficulty had him conveyed by slow stages to his own house, where he yet remained. He was now planning to get him taken up to the hills for a spell, leaving him in a salubrious locality whilst he and young Vanborough did some shooting and travelling, returning for him in due course, to carry him off to England with them when they should be ready for home.

It was of these things they were talking during the heat of the afternoon, as the punkah slowly swung to and fro, and the silence of the noontide hours fell upon the world without.

"You've got a sort of place of your own somewhere in England, haven't you, Sir Humphrey?" asked York.

"Yes; just a little corner of a place, wedged in between two other properties; standing in a small triangular gore—about four or five acres in all, I suppose. Not worth having, you say, Archie? Well, I don't know. My father bought the little place, and lived out the last years of his life there. I have always had a feeling that I shall go back there when my time comes. It's one of the scraps of the old world left us; at least, if time, and steam, and electricity have left it alone. I have not been there for over fifteen years; but I think about it often enough. A tiny fragment of monastic architecture—a little survival of bygone days. A queer house for a bachelor like me to inhabit. It goes by the name of the Nun's Bower!"

Archie broke into a boyish laugh; but the soldier's face kindled with interest. He looked at Sir Humphrey as one who desired to know more, and the elder man spoke on as

though it pleased him to recall those things which belonged to his youth—to his past.

“I suppose in olden days there must have been a regular monastic settlement there. The Squire’s house goes by the name of Bishop’s Hall, and tradition says it stands on the site of an old monastery that was pulled down by Henry’s Cromwell, and built up again as an ecclesiastical residence later on. One of my boundaries is his park wall, the other the fence surrounding Convent House. That is another survival of some old-time nunnery, I imagine. And I fancy that Nun’s Bower must have been an offset, though I have never known exactly the history of the place. It is plain, however, that once the two must have been one community, for a curious and very ancient avenue of yew trees runs right away from the garden of Convent House to the dividing fence between us; and we put a gate there to enable us to have easy access. My father and Mr. Lynne were great cronies. Poor man, he was something of an invalid and valetudinarian ever since I can remember; but he outlived my father by a great number of years. I saw his death in the paper only a few weeks ago. I wonder if I shall find the old house empty when I get back, or whether new neighbours will have come?”

“Had he no children? Or was the property not his to bequeath?”

“He had two daughters, but no son. I think the property was his own. The younger daughter married—rather against his wishes, if I remember rightly. The other remained with him, and was there when last I visited the place. She may, of course, have married, or have died since. I have gradually dropped all intercourse with my old world. It will be rather strange going back. Rather melancholy, perhaps. And yet the old place seems to call me.”

A little while later, when Sir Humphrey was alone in his private room, he suddenly unlocked a drawer, where a few entirely private and personal belongings were carefully

bestowed. He laid his hand upon a small packet, which contained a few yellow and faded letters, a few brown and withered flowers—and a photograph.

It was this last that he took in his hands, and held towards the light of the reading-lamp. It was faded too, and had been taken when photography was wont to caricature as much as to catch a likeness. It represented a slight, youthful-looking woman, in the long, close-fitting robe which had followed as a reaction after the terrible crinoline of the sixties. It was a full-length carte-de-visite, after the fashion of the day, and the face was only rendered by a small pale circle, more faded than any other portion ; and yet Sir Humphrey gazed long and earnestly at that pictured face, striving to recall it feature by feature, and only laying it aside after long study, and with something of a sigh.

At the foot of the card was written in his own firm, characteristic hand, the two words, “ Esther Lynne.”

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A tall, handsome girl, clad in a well-cut riding habit, was standing very upright in the centre of a London drawing-room. The house was in a fashionable part of town, and the two other occupants were well-dressed girls, with the unmistakable air of those who move in fashionable social circles. These two bore a strong likeness to each other ; but none at all to the equestrian who had evidently just entered the room after her ride.

The faces of all three were flushed. Plainly “ words ” were passing between them. The tall girl drew herself up to her full height proudly. Her dark eyes flashed.

“ I have not the least idea what you mean ! ” she cried.

“ Oh, yes, you have, Diana ; you know perfectly what I mean. You are always doing it—it has been going on ever since you came here last summer. There was Frank Greystone—you know as well as I do how it was with him and me.

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But you swooped down on him, and now he is in South Africa ; and if he is killed there, it will be your doing."

"I am glad he went to South Africa ! It was the best thing he could do. It will make a man of him ; then he may be worth something. He was only a pretty boy before. Is that my worst or only sin ? for I shall not repent in dust and ashes for that !"

"The only one !—that was only the beginning. It has been the same with everyone since. There was Tom Hunter ; there was Edmund Halliday ; there were several in between, and last of all there is Charley Seaton. Look there !" and the girl pushed an open letter towards Diana, at which she did not condescend to look. "He has gone off, like all the rest. It is a shame the way you go on. You make them all think—well, think that you care. They leave everybody else for you. And then you serve them like this. It is abominable ! It is detestable of you ! I wish you had never come here at all."

The girl spoke hotly, for her sister sat dissolved in tears, and her own feelings were outraged and hurt. Diana stood up before them very straight, looking toweringly tall in her indignation.

"Very good," she said slowly. "You shall not have me much longer. I did not know you set such store by that pack of—boys—you always have hanging round the house. Where I come from we don't regard every boy we talk to and play with in the light of a lover. I hate that sort of fooling. Boys are very well to chaff with and play games with ; but—"

"No, Diana, it's no good your trying to put it off like that. You may not have tried to attract them in that way ; but you know how it is with you—you must be first. You must have everybody at your feet. You must be leader wherever you are. If you don't know that about yourself yet, you had better learn it. For it may get you into trouble one of these days. I don't know what you feel, and I don't ask ;

but I know what you make others feel, and then you laugh at them. It is your play, but it is not play to them; and sometimes it is not play to others either," and she cast a meaning look at her sister, who still cried quietly on.

"Grizzling for a boy!" was the almost contemptuous thought in Diana's heart, as she gathered up her habit and marched out of the room, with her head held rather high. If any of her companion's words had gone home, she was not going to show it. She went up quickly to her own room, and dashed her gloves and whip down upon the table.

"Well, this hand is about played out!" she said. "I began to guess it before; now I know. I must move on; that's very plain. And where shall I go next? Back to Canada? Well, that's not just what I want. I've come over here, and I want to stop, for the present at least. But I can't stay where I'm not wanted. Besides, I've had about enough of this show." She paused, and threw back her handsome head. Then she moved to the window, and stood looking down into the street. Masses of spring flowers were being hawked about in carts from house to house. People were buying almost eagerly.

Diana knew not that these were no products of English gardens yet, but came from warmer climes. She suddenly conjured up a picture of an old-world garden, bright with flowers, dreaming beneath a hot sun; a cloistered walk, a sunk lawn, a hoary sun-dial in its midst.

"Mother used to talk about it," she suddenly exclaimed. "It was her home. That is where I will go. My Aunt Esther lives there still. She will take me in. I always said I would look up old Esther one of these days. It may be dull; but it will be peaceful. Yes, decidedly, I will go there—on a visit of inspection, if for nothing else."

CHAPTER II

DIANA CONQUEST

SHE came something like a whirlwind upon that still, quiet house. Esther Lynne was in her garden; for the sun was shining, and the flowers in sheltered borders were beginning to respond to the warm, caressing touch. She heard a rapid footfall, and turned to see a tall black figure advancing, with outstretched hands. She did not recognise the intruder; but at a time when all the world was garbed in black, it was not always easy at a moment's notice to distinguish one friend from another, or friend from stranger. Certainly this bright-haired girl wore the aspect of a friend, and Esther, after watching her advance for a moment, began to walk towards her. But soon she became convinced that she had never seen her guest before; and yet—and yet—what did her easy, graceful carriage, her tall, slender figure, the brightness of her hair recall? A flush dyed the face of the elder woman. She seemed to realise who it was whom she was about to greet. A flood of memories rushed over her, bringing tears to her eyes. Her hands went out eagerly to the advancing radiant vision, a little sob broke from trembling lips.

“My dear! My dear!” was all she could find to say.

The smile which flashed over the tall girl's face was like a ray of summer sunshine.

“Do you know me?” she asked, springing forward and grasping the eager, trembling hands; “I thought I should have to introduce myself. I am Diana Conquest; and you are my Aunt Esther.”

As she spoke, Diana bent her head ; she had to bend it rather low, for her height was a very stately one, and Esther Lynne was of that medium stature which belonged to her generation. They kissed each other, and Diana's hands were laid upon Esther's shoulders. The girl's wide-open grey eyes looked full into her liquid brown ones, and the fresh young voice exclaimed impulsively :

"Oh, I am glad I have come, though in the train I had half a mind to turn back !"

"My dear, why ?"

"Oh, because I have behaved so badly to you, Esther—you'll let me call you Esther, won't you ?"

"My dear—I am your aunt."

"I know you are. That's just it. You are my aunt, and I'm going to like you tremendously. I feel it all over me. And if I call you Aunt Esther, I shall not feel as though you were my aunt at all. To me it would sound just as though you were a fat old negress in the kitchen. You know, over yonder, where I lived as a child, it was always the darkies who were uncles and aunts."

Esther Lynne looked for the moment just a little taken aback. She had been brought up in the old-fashioned school. She was an old-world woman, and real modernity was but a name to her, although Sally Hastings sought from time to time to open her eyes to what was passing in the great world without. But, after all, Sally was herself only a regular country girl—a bit of a hoyden—picking up odds and ends of slang from her brother, and assimilating new ideas from time to time when paying visits or entertaining guests, but without much greater opportunities than Esther's own of really keeping pace with the changing order of the day. Dimly, from the first moment of self-introduction, Esther Lynne felt that this girl had lived and moved in a world altogether different from her own. She came charged, as it were, with a new and vivid vitality. She was beautiful to look at ; but that was not all.

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Her very beauty and grace had in its essence something slightly daring, something piquantly defiant and unconventional. Esther could not analyse all in a moment wherein this marked individuality lay; but it smote upon her consciousness as something insistent and dominant. It would be a factor which would have to be reckoned with by those whose lives touched hers.

Diana suddenly laughed out—such a silvery, gladsome peal! Again she bent her head and kissed her aunt on either cheek.

“You are a darling. And I shall call you Esther; and you will find you like it soon. Don’t you know the modern child is beginning to call its parents by their Christian names? We must move with the times, you know. We can’t be stranded in a back-water all our days; though this is the sweetest of back-waters imaginable. It brings back mother’s stories so!”

“Your mother told you of it sometimes?”

“Oh, yes! I fancy I shall know my way about some! Convent House, you call it. I think it was the name put me off from a visit last year. I couldn’t help picturing a sort of nunnery business; and then I wasn’t quite sure if I should have been welcome. I wasn’t sure of it to-day; but I just came. I thought I might be able to square an aunt. I wasn’t so sure about a grandfather.”

“You never wrote to tell us you were in England. I think your grandfather would have liked to see you, had he known, and been able to understand.”

“But he never forgave my mother her marriage, did he?” asked Diana quickly. “She never used to write to him—only to you.”

“I scarcely know what he felt about it after the first. I always think that had your parents come here—after you were born—there would have been a reconciliation. But your father succeeded unexpectedly to wealth, and went off to

America. He never wrote at all, and your mother was irregular in her correspondence ; and somehow the breach was never healed. It was a great sorrow to me. It left me so much alone. Arabella had been very dear. It was like losing the sunshine out of the house when she went. It has never come back since. Perhaps you will bring it with you, dear. Have you come to stay ? ”

“ Will you ask me to stay ? ” asked Diana, her eyes arch.

“ My dear, surely you know that there is always a home for you here, if ever you wish to avail yourself of it.”

A softer expression than Esther had yet seen there passed over the girl's bright face.

“ You are good to say that ! Do you know, it is years and years since I had a home. When mother died, father broke up the dear old home in Virginia ; and we migrated to Canada, and went all over the shop, seeing the new world and the old, never resting long anywhere. I liked it tremendously at first. I'm not sure that I shall ever settle down again ; but when he died two years ago, I did begin then to hanker after something of a home. But I couldn't start and run the show myself, and I went visiting about from place to place. People were kind and hospitable, and I wanted to forget my trouble and have a good time. Well, I think, on the whole, I managed to get that. But I feel like taking breath for a spell now. Esther, will you let me be a nun in Convent House whilst I have a look around and make up my mind to the next move ? I'll be as good as is in me. I'm not made like you, I know ; but I'll be as little of a cuss as I can.”

“ My love—”

“ Ah, well, I'll tone down my vocabulary as far as possible. Say, is it a bargain ? Will you have me for a bit, if I promise to be on my very best behaviour ? I'll really try not to disgrace you more than I can help.”

“ We need not make any bargain about it, dear child. You are welcome to a home at Convent House so long as ever you

wish it. I hope you brought your boxes with you, if you meant to stay."

"Well, no ; my cheek didn't run to that. I only brought a dressing-bag, hoping to get quarters for one night, whilst we thrashed out the subject. I can go back and settle up to-morrow, and be back here in a few days, if you'll really have me. What a place to come to ! I'd no idea an old house could be so lovely ! And this immemorial turf—that's the right word for it, isn't it?—how do you get it ? We never see that kind over the pond. And this cloistered walk ! Yes, mother used to try and make me understand what it looked like, but I never did. We don't have old ecclesiastical fragments in Ole Virginie, you know."

Diana was standing by the hoary sun-dial in the centre of the ancient sunk lawn, whose velvet smoothness was such a source of wonder and admiration to her. This lawn was bounded on two sides by a very ancient fragment of a cloistered walk ; one side facing south—being, in fact, a continuation of the south front of the house on that side, the other facing east ; so that in the winter you could sit in the sun, and in summer find deep refreshing shade after the morning hours had passed. Antiquarians always surmised that this cloister was the only portion left of the old convent itself, and that the present house had been built up out of the fragments of the shattered buildings, probably a century later than its demolition. The eastern wall ran down almost to the little stream which bounded the garden to the south, and a small rustic bridge, with a gate at the end, gave access to the footpath to the road on the other side ; a thick belt of alder and willow shut out all view of the road and the passers-by ; but glimpses of the traffic would have been small drawback had this not been the case, for Cleethorpe was a very quiet little village—a true Sleepy Hollow, as visitors loved to call it, declaring this to be one of its chiefest charms.

Diana, with her arm across Esther's shoulder, traced the

course of the stream, as it wound through the quaint, old-world garden, a little off-shoot forming the chain of fish-ponds leading one from the other, that made such a feature of the place. Her delight in it all, freshly and vividly expressed, was listened to with a sense of deep pleasure by the one to whom every nook and corner was so dear, so full of tender associations. As they skirted the fish-ponds, they came suddenly upon a wide yew walk—a regular avenue, straight as though it had been drawn with a ruler upon a sheet of paper. The ground beneath the yew-trees was brown; but the carpet of the avenue was of soft velvet turf. Diana stood gazing up the vista with admiration in her eyes.

“What a fascinating walk! Where does it lead to? Is that a gate I see at the end? What is on the other side?”

“Another house, dear, and another garden. But the owner is away; has been away for very long now. His father and mine were old friends; but Mr. Vanborough died many years ago. His son owns it after him; but he has not visited the place since his father’s death. He is Sir Humphrey now; perhaps you have heard of him. He is a very distinguished man. I hardly suppose he will ever live in such a little corner of the world as this. But his house is a perfect museum of curiosities. He sends great cases home sometimes, and I unpack them and set the things out. He likes me to do that. But I do not much fancy he will ever live here again. The house is small—”

“And he has a big family, I dare say; but perhaps they will be grown up themselves, and out in the world soon.”

“Oh, no, my dear, Sir Humphrey Vanborough has never married,” answered Esther Lynne; and suddenly a little flush of pink dyed her cheek.

But Diana did not see; she was looking up the avenue still. She seemed interested and aroused.

“You shall show me the house one day, if you have the *entrée* of it. I love curios, though I never was a collector

myself. I found it hard enough to get trunk room enough for all my chiffons and things. But I hope Sir Humphrey will pay a visit to his house whilst I am here. I like men who have seen life and done things. One gets so sick of the boys who are just going to be paragons—and generally end in being fiascos !”

“My dear, a man’s career cannot be made in a day. It has to be built up year by year with toil and care and much patience. You are scarcely old enough yet to have watched even one career develop. For ten years after Humphrey first went away we heard almost nothing of him. He was laying the foundations well, you see. But it is not foundations that show at the outset what the structure is to be.”

They turned to walk towards the house again. Diana spoke in her rather sudden way, which was saved from abruptness by a singularly charming fashion she had of smiling as she spoke, just as the rapidity and unexpectedness of some of her movements were redeemed from the same drawback by her exceeding and indescribable grace.

“I am twenty-five,” she said ; “how old are you ?”

“I was fifty last birthday, my dear. Just twice your age.”

“We will be two old maids together !” suddenly spoke the girl. “You shall teach me to be good, Esther, and I will teach you to be happy. Do you know that you have a very sad face, though you are quite lovely still ?”

“I was never lovely, dear. That was the word which expressed best your mother’s great beauty. I will show you the portrait of her, painted just the year before she married. You are very like her—in some ways. You have her hair and her eyes, and something of her movements and air. But you are much, much taller.”

“Five ten and a half,” answered Diana. “Yes, I am rather a hulker, I know. I should have preferred to stop at five nine ; but I take after father’s family. All the Conquests are tall.”

"It suits you, my dear. You know how to carry your height. Now, come in, Diana, and have some tea, and I will have a room got ready for you. And you shall tell me all about yourself that you care to do, as we sit cosily together over the fire. The air is getting chilly, and soon it will be growing dusk."

It seemed dusk already in the house ; for the mullioned windows with their leaded casements did not admit the light very freely, and panelled walls and timbered ceilings have a certain picturesque gloom of their own. But the piled-up fires of logs made glorious glow everywhere, and Diana exclaimed again and again as she passed through one room after another, till they reached the cosy boudoir at the end, which was Esther's special sanctum, and where tea was standing waiting for them on its ancient carved table, the old silver and china being a study in themselves, and drawing enthusiastic comments from the girl, who was plainly in the humour to fall in love with everything.

Her aunt had fallen in love with her by this time. That likeness to her dead sister, so dearly loved and tenderly mourned, would almost have been sufficient without Diana's own inherent talent for fascinating those who came beneath her spell. The liking, it seemed, was mutual ; for before the girl had been taken to her room, to make such simple toilet as was possible under the circumstances, she had flung her arms round Esther's neck, exclaiming :

"You are just delightful, and I am going to fall head over ears in love with you ! What have the men been thinking of all this time ? The way those blundering creatures choose their wives ! Oh, my !—there is really nothing else left to say !"

After dinner they came back to the cosy boudoir, and Diana subsided in a graceful heap on the rug at the feet of her aunt.

"Esther," she said suddenly, "I'm going to make a

The Piece of Esther Lynne

confession to you before we take any irrevocable step. I'm not going to come to you under false pretences. I'm going to own up straight off; and you needn't have me after that, if you don't want. I shall not be in the least offended if you kick me out neck and crop."

"Dear child!" began Esther; but she was becoming used already to Diana's vagaries, and smiled as she spoke:

"Well, let us out with it at once. I am just hopelessly and irreclaimably selfish—selfish all through, you know; and though I know it perfectly, I never seem exactly to care about being different. I have been horribly spoiled all my life by other people, and now I am spoiling myself all I know. Whatever I like I have, whatever I want to do I do; and if ever I get the least bored I go away to be amused somewhere else. If people don't like me, I loathe them, and I make tracks forthwith. Mostly they do like me—I take care they shall. But if anything happens between us—well, it's all up a gum-tree then! I'm not going to stand any criticism, and that's the end of the whole show. So now you know what you are letting yourself in for. I'm like the proverbial pretty little girl with the pretty little curl on her forehead: when I am good I am very, very good, and when I am naughty, I am—horrid. I won't be naughty here if I can help it; but I'm too old and too wise to promise anything. So don't have me if you funk it!"

For answer Esther put her hand upon the girl's bright hair, and caressed it tenderly. It was such pretty hair, growing low on the forehead like Esther's own, but instead of being parted and lying in waves on each side of the face after the old style, it was turned back and held by combs, so as to make a rippling frame for the charming face. Some of the tresses were piled up coronet fashion, and some were coiled low as far as the nape of the neck. It was an elaborate but most becoming style of dressing, and the girl's well-cut, rustling skirts, and the elegant corsage, simple though it was in

appearance, yet seemed to have writ large upon them the words, "Paris model."

"Esther, I know that my father was rather like that. He told me so himself. He hated disagreeable things; just as I hate them. He used to tell me that I could only be young once, and that it was for the young to get all the brightness and happiness out of life that they could. That was his creed; I think it is mine too. And yet, sometimes, when I am reading a good book—not a goody one, you know; can't stand *that* sort—or listening to a sermon that is worth listening to—there are not many such, you bet!—or sometimes just looking at pictures or hearing music, especially cathedral music, there comes over me a sort of disgust of everything, a hating of it all and of myself. Just for five minutes or so, at such times, I regret that there are not real convents to go into, to be away from it all, and to live a life of devotion; isn't that the right word? But then in about an hour I've forgotten all about it, and all my good resolutions; and things go on just as before. Say, do you think if I ever came to live at Convent House that would be a cure?"

Esther did not make reply; her thoughts had gone off upon an excursion of their own. They were back in the days of her own youth, and that of the sister whom she so tenderly loved, so ardently admired, so strove to shield from everything that was hard, or distasteful, or dull. Arabella Lynne had lived her life at Convent House; yet she had with charm, and grace and winning sweetness, escaped every unwelcome task which might naturally have fallen upon her. She had skimmed the pleasure off life, and had left Esther to perform all the hard and distasteful tasks. And in the end, when it began to be evident that the father's health was failing, when it was pretty well known that the obscure malady under which he laboured would very slowly and gradually sap his strength, reducing him to the helpless invalid he had been for so many years prior to his death, it was Arabella who had declared that life would

become insupportable under such circumstances; it was she who, in actual defiance of the commands of this querulous father, who himself, by judicious and filial humouring, might easily have been persuaded to revoke his decision, cut the Gordian knot by a runaway marriage, and had never visited her home since, but had left the entire burden of the sick and failing invalid to be borne by the elder sister alone. Perhaps she had never seen it all quite so clearly (for love like hers is tenderly blind) till Arabella's daughter, sitting at her feet, confessed to her in frank and open terms the same failing in her own character.

Diana raised her eyes suddenly, to find Esther's full of tears. She sprang up and threw her arms about her impulsively.

"I did not mean to hurt you. I quite understand. You do not want me; of course you do not!"

"My dear, I want you more than ever. You are dearer to me at this moment than you can understand. Perhaps one day, when we know each other better, I will tell you why. Come, my child, and make a home with me here, as long as ever you wish; but remember this, Diana, my darling, it is not the place that makes the character. Our besetting sins follow us wherever we go. But again, the blessed converse of this is, that wherever we are, the same help can enter and follow us. Nothing can keep it from us. And there is a strength in which we can fight and conquer; only we must use the right weapon for it."

Diana spoke not a word; but her lips quivered. She threw her arms about Esther's neck, and then suddenly swept from the room, and was seen no more that night.

CHAPTER III

THE RECTOR'S DAUGHTER

"I SAY, Stella, have you heard the news?"

Sally Hastings burst into the Rectory with this question on her lips, just as Stella and the little ones were preparing to go out for their morning walk. Stella was as soberly attired as was her wont; with a touch of Quaker-like neatness, not devoid here and there of an artistic touch of bright, harmonious colouring; but there was a little anxious fold between the eyes, and an expression of harassed worry upon her face, and when Sally's eager question was heard she only said:

"Oh, yes, I know. Isn't it dreadful? And when once that sort of thing begins in the spring, one never knows where it will end."

Sally's eyes had opened wide; now she burst into a loud laugh.

"What on earth are you talking about, you worried worm?"

This was not, perhaps, a very engaging sobriquet; but it was meant by the outspoken Sally as a term of endearment. Stella was used to it, and it provoked no comment. She only answered in the same rather harassed way:

"Oh, don't you know? There was a case of scarlet fever down in one of the river-side cottages yesterday. The boy has been taken away to the infirmary; but one never knows whether it may spread. And I daren't go myself to see that things are being done right about disinfecting and all that, because of Edna and the children," and the fold deepened between the girl's pretty, soft hazel eyes.

The Niece of Esther Lynne

"My dear Stella, what a fuss all about nothing ! When do we ever go through a spring without an isolated case of infection here or there ? And do you really think that the doctor and the parish nurse between them are not equal to the task of seeing to things, without the Lord High Everything at their heels ? "

This was another of Sally's names for Stella, and she was used to Sally's chaff.

She smiled a very little as she answered :

"You see Nurse Binks is not popular everywhere. She is capable and kind in her way, but a little overbearing ; and she does not always take pains to explain the reasons to the people for the things she orders them to do, and the doctor—"

"And a good thing, too ! What do those sort of people want with reasons ? Let 'em do as they're told—in the good old-fashioned way !" cried sturdy Sally. "I'm sick of all the argu-fying that goes on nowadays ! Why, even the kids have to have everything explained to them before they condescend to obey their parents. Bless me ! if ever I marry and have a family, I'll stand no such humbug. I'll keep a little switch handy, like my grandmother ; and I'll argue matters with that—little cheeky beggars ! "

Stella laughed outright at this, and when the harassed look passed from her face, it showed itself as a very pretty one. She was built on rather a small scale ; but held herself so upright that she gave the impression of being somewhat taller than her actual inches. She possessed regular and well-cut features, and soft, cloudy dark hair, and her well-arched eyebrows were of jetty blackness, like the long lashes which fringed the hazel eyes. Her colouring was delicate and soft, as that upon the petals of a wild rose. On the rare occasions when the girl let herself go, as it were, and joined in girlish merriment and pastimes, she showed herself capable of considerable capacity for enjoyment, and was not lacking in personal attraction. Sally often had occasion to deal her

back-handed compliments on this very ground. She and Stella were by way of being friends and cronies, though they were poles apart in opinion, in tastes, and in the ordering of their lives.

The two girls were standing in the square parlour-like hall of the old Rectory, a babble of children's voices came through an open door adjacent, and now another voice was heard calling out :

"Is that Sally? Come in, Sally, and tell your news!"

Sally entered the pretty morning room to find Stella's young step-mother lying, as usual, on her couch, surrounded by her three "babies," as she called them, dear little curly-headed toddling creatures, the youngest—a pair of twins—being four, and the boy Teddy nearly six years old. Since the birth of the twins, Mrs. Sinclair had been more or less an invalid. She was about eight years older than Stella, and had been her dearest friend a long while. Marriage with Stella's widower-father had not loosened the tie. And the harmony of the house was perfect; Stella taking all the active duties upon her shoulders, and leaving to the invalid only such small and easy matters as she was well able to manage.

"Didn't I hear that you brought news with you, Sally?" asked Mrs. Sinclair eagerly. "You must tell it to me, if Stella is too busy to listen. News is not to be despised in our quiet Cleëthorpe. We get none too much."

"Perhaps we shan't be so quiet in future!" cried Sally. "Miss Lynne's niece is coming to live with her—at least to stay with her on a good long visit. I just saw her yesterday. Such a stunner! She looks about six foot; but she says she isn't so much—and her face and her figure, and the way she turns herself out! Oh, you've got to see that for yourself! And she's been all over the world pretty well, and has lived lots in America, and she's going to make things hum here, you bet! That's what she said herself, only I can't make it sound as she does. She isn't a bit loud or mannish—like what mother says

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I am—but she's a way with her I can't explain, for she says things that would make your hair curl if other people said them; but it sounds just all right with her, makes you want to sit and look at her all the time."

This was news indeed! Stella paused in her occupation of putting on little Cissy's gloves, and gazed at Sally with questioning eyes. Mrs. Sinclair put the inquiry that the girl had scarcely liked to do before the children. Stella was finding out that the little pitchers were beginning to develop long ears.

"What does Miss Lynne think about it all? I scarcely knew she had a niece. I always understood that there had been some sort of split in the family."

"Well, I don't profess to know all about that. One knows the sister did make a runaway match, and left Miss Lynne with the old father, and never came near them again. But I suppose the girl couldn't help that. Anyhow, she's come to see her aunt, and Miss Lynne is just delighted. You can see it in her dear old face and hear it in her voice. She's awfully proud of her handsome niece already. Poor dear! After the life she has led I do think she deserves some happiness and sunshine now. This Diana is going to cheer her up a lot, I'm sure; but whether it'll be all beer and skittles, that arrangement, remains to be proved."

"What do you mean, Sally?" asked Mrs. Sinclair, smiling.

Sally wrinkled up her stubby nose, rabbit fashion, and looked preternaturally wise. There was a shrewd gleam in her greeny-grey eyes, which gave to her face a comical expression.

"Well, it's like this: I can fancy that a niece, six feet high, and as pretty as they're made, and with a will of her own that you seem to see sticking out all over her, might be rather a large order to take into your house full-fledged like that. Poor Miss Lynne has never had a chance of her own way yet. She just lived for that tiresome old father. Oh, well, you

know I don't mean any harm of the poor old chap—he's dead and gone now. But he did lead her a life, and she never thought of anything but him. And now, just when we all want her to have her little fling, and play her own hand, down comes this sort of she-conquering hero—her name is Conquest, if you please, which seems a bit too significant—and I'm half afraid it may be just the same old game over again with different players; Miss Lynne always taking second fiddle, when it's time she should boss the show herself."

When the children were all gloved and ready, they started forth upon their walk, the twins holding Stella's hands, Teddy prancing on in front, or sometimes condescending to walk beside Sally and engage her in conversation. She always fascinated the children, whom she called the kids; she never tried to talk down to their level, but constantly bewildered and charmed them by her peculiar vocabulary and her fascinating command of grimaces.

Stella spoke suddenly, following out her own train of thought.

"Miss Lynne's has been such a beautiful life—an ideal life, to my thinking. There has been no thought of self in it from first to last. She has just lived for others. That is what I call real life—the highest of all. That is what I should like mine to be—no thought in it for self, but always for those about us. The life of self-sacrifice; the life of Christ."

Sally had wrinkled up her nose a little, and was looking sideways at Stella, with a quaint expression on her blunt features. At the last word, however, her expression changed, and the words she might have spoken she held back. She felt to a certain extent as though Stella had taken the wind out of her sails—assumed an unfair advantage of her. If you take too high a tone, you rob your opponent of the chance to pass a jest.

"Well, everyone to his taste," she replied, after a short pause; "I know you regard me as a lost soul, or something

akin to it. But I wasn't made for poking my nose into cottages, or teaching kids in school, or fooling round at bazaars, or at garbage—I beg pardon, I mean jumble—sales. I don't feel called upon to sacrifice myself to that extent. I'm good at games, and I'm no good at anything else; and I think one is best doing the things one can best do, and leaving the rest alone. I think the parish can get on very comfortably without me; and I wasn't born a rector's daughter—thank goodness!"

By this time the party had arrived at the fork in the road at Clee Mill, and the children were clamouring to be taken to see "Auntie Miss Lynne," as they insisted on calling her. But Stella had many errands to do in the village, and the children had been early taught to walk up and down a cottage garden whilst Sister Stella went inside. It was dull work for them; but Stella strove to impress upon them that they must not think of themselves, that they must learn unselfishness in little things; and being docile children, they had obeyed her submissively so far, though Teddy began to show symptoms of revolt which sometimes gave anxiety to his watchful guardian. But to-day Sally came to the rescue by offering to take "the kids" to Convent House herself, and to leave them in Miss Lynne's charge, to be called for later. Teddy pranced for joy on hearing this offer, and the twins made a rush to gain possession of Sally's hands. Stella wavered a moment, and then gave way to the combined pressure put upon her.

"Very well, if you will be careful of them, Sally. I want to speak to Miss Lynne about two or three little things. I will come for the children later. The niece will not be there to-day?"

"No; she went off yesterday to get her belongings together. She will be back pretty soon, but I don't know exactly when."

It was a good hour later before Stella found herself free to seek her charges in Convent House. She found them

playing happily with Miss Lynne's Irish terrier in the sunny, cloistered garden, whilst Esther herself paced up and down the covered walk watching them, and acting as referee in all difficulties that might arise. Sally had gone off after hearing all there was to hear about the coming of Diana Conquest. After all, Miss Lynne had not very much to say to anyone about it yet. Her niece wanted to pay her a visit, and was coming. How long that visit would last was an open question.

Stella was interested ; but with her parish affairs came a long way first, and she had much to discuss with Miss Lynne, whose sympathetic nature and unfailing liberality made her a person of importance in Stella's little world. When the budget of news had been thoroughly discussed, Esther remarked gently :

"I wanted to see you, Stella, about a good many things. I hope now to be able to relieve you of several cares and duties that you have gradually taken upon yourself. You have too much to do, my dear child. It is quite weighing you down. But now that I have set my house in order, as it were, and got back my strength again, I shall be glad to come to your aid. And perhaps we shall find another helper in Diana. She has led a curious roving life hitherto ; but she will be all the better for some fixed duties when she comes here to settle down for a while."

Stella smiled, but she spoke a little hastily :

"Oh, that is so kind of you ; but, indeed, I am not over-worked. I arrange my time carefully, so as to get everything in. You see, they naturally look to the Rectory ; and father tells me all that is wanted—all that is going on. You do help us immensely ; we are always coming to you ; but—"

"But I am not to do more than dispense kitchen physic and coal tickets and warm clothing ? Is that it, Stella ?" asked Esther, with a smile. "And what of my old Mothers' Meeting, which I was obliged to give up these past two years ? I know Lady Caroline did not get on with it, and it fell to

your lot after all. May I not have my mothers back, my dear ? ”

Stella flushed a little as she realised somewhat the construction which might be put upon her words.

“ Oh, Miss Lynne, you did not think I meant that ! I was not thinking of the mothers. Of course, they will be delighted to have you back. But please don’t send me away altogether. Let me help you. Indeed, I often feel it wants more than one to take it. It has grown a good bit bigger. And I am so interested in the mothers, and I know them all, and—”

“ My dear Stella, it is not for me to say what you shall or shall not do ; and personally I should be glad enough of your help. But I shall have a niece now for a while to help me (if she be willing), and you are really doing too much. You have the choir to train and the organ to practise, you have your Sunday-school class, and your Bible-class for boys. You are treasurer to almost all the little parish charities and clubs, and though each individually may not take much time, yet in the aggregate it must involve a considerable amount of care and thought. You have a great deal of visiting to do, and you go to the schools constantly. Then at home you have a certain amount of housekeeping—”

“ Oh, but that is very little, indeed. Edna manages beautifully. I just do the overlooking in the kitchen—”

“ Yes, dear ! and the children’s walks, and some of their little lessons. They will soon be needing more time and care as they grow older ; and if you still decide against a more responsible nurse for them, your time will be increasingly engrossed at home.”

“ Oh, but Edna means to teach them, and have them more with her as they grow older,” spoke Stella eagerly. “ I know you do not agree with us, but we both feel a great wish really to bring them up ourselves, and not give them over into the hands of a regular nurse, who will manage them her own way, and perhaps win them away from us, or, at least, keep me

more or less out of the nursery. We are most particular about the village girl who comes to nurse-maid them. Annie is most good and trustworthy, and she looks up to me, and will fall into any arrangement I like to make. Indeed, I think we are right. The charge of little children is a very precious responsibility," and Stella's face grew soft as she gazed at the little ones engrossed in their happy play.

Miss Lynne smiled a little, and a half-sigh escaped her. It seemed such a little time since Stella herself had been a toddler in a white frock, playing around the old sun-dial; and here she was, with a face over-grave and anxious for her three-and-twenty years, talking of her responsibilities in the matter of these children.

"But your drawing, Stella," said Esther, after a brief pause, "I want to see you take that up again. Your brother took so much care and pains over the studio he contrived for you, and you have such a talent that you should try and exercise it. If you would only consent to transfer some of these innumerable small duties to other willing hands, you would be able to do something again with your pencil and brush. Do you never think of the good lessons your father gave you in London? Is it not a pity to let everything go like this?"

An eager light had flashed, at the first mention of drawing, into Stella's eyes, but little by little it died away.

"I don't think I shall ever be able to take up my drawing again," she said slowly; "I have almost made up my mind to that."

Esther was silent. She had known Stella from her baby-hood; she had watched her development; she knew her strong points and her weak ones. She was beginning to be aware of that strain of firmness—or obstinacy—she scarcely knew by which name to call it, which combined itself with much outward gentleness and appearance of moderation and reasonableness. She had found before this that it was one thing to advise Stella Sinclair, and to believe that her advice

would be followed, and quite another to note any real difference made in accordance with her words of counsel.

"She's as good as you like ; but awful pig-headed !" Sally had blurted out one day. These words recurred to Esther at this moment, and a little smile curved her lips.

Suddenly Stella spoke with rather more than her customary emphasis—spoke almost vehemently.

"It is because I love my drawing above everything that I feel I must not touch it. I am afraid to begin. I should grow absorbed. I should not know when or how to stop. When I think of pictures—oh ! I see such things ! My fingers tingle to get to work. But I must not ; I am quite sure of it. It would be selfish. It would be a self-indulgence. Last Lent I made my resolve. I gave up all thoughts of a career. My duties lie about me here. The rest I must sacrifice. Is not self-sacrifice the true road of the Cross, the path we all must tread if we are to follow in—in—His footsteps ?"

Still Esther remained silent. She was not quick of speech. She was not even very quick of thought. She was often conscious of some flaw, of some fallacy in words that she heard, in arguments that she read ; but could not at once lay her finger upon the weak spot. Stella's enthusiasm for self-sacrifice was known to her. She admired whilst she deplored some of the phases it seemed likely to take with the advance of years. In an age of so much pleasure-seeking and robust unblushing selfishness in the rising generation, this was certainly a contrast in many ways agreeable ; but she felt a fear lest Stella should carry her theories too far ; should become unconsciously a busy-body and a village autocrat, her range of vision limited, and her tastes and talents crippled ; yet she felt it a great difficulty to speak words to so young a creature which should seem to counsel her to act in any way against her conscience. The girl needed a wider outlook, and that is what is often so difficult to obtain.

Stella was quick to detect anything like disapproval in those

whose good opinion she valued. She looked up into Esther's face, and spoke with some vehemence.

"I should have thought you would understand so well. Your own life has been such an example! You gave up everything!"

"My dear, my own duty was plain. I did not take it. I did not choose it. It was laid upon me. The dependence of parent upon child is only second in its sacredness to that of child upon parent. And we can none of us see the end from the beginning. Had I known and understood what a long, long decay it would have been, I think I should have taken steps to share the burden in some measure. But it came so slowly, so gradually. It was only bit by bit everything else had to be given up; and then it seemed probable that it would be for such a short time. I think it is not meant by God—I think it is not quite good for anyone—that all should be swallowed up in one overwhelming care. Do not take my life as your pattern, Stella; for you will make a mistake if you do. God gives us all things richly to enjoy. Do not forget that. And now you must take these mites home to their dinner. You have them well in hand, my dear. They would only let me put their gingerbread into a bag to be taken home for tea. 'Sister Stella does not like us to eat between meals,' they said."

Stella and her charges passed through the garden and across the little bridge to the footpath leading out upon the road. As they reached the highway, Stella gave a start, and a young man leaning against a tree close by stepped forward, lifting his hat with a smile, as he said:

"Sally told me I should see you if I waited here. Have you got a welcome for me yet, Stella?"

She had turned from red to pale, and from pale to red; and as she held out her hand, she uttered only one word:

"Rudolf!"

CHAPTER IV

THE SQUIRE'S SON

STELLA was looking thoroughly startled.

The young man who had accosted her took off his hat, smiling. The children capered about him, making demonstrations of welcome, which he received good-humouredly, and then bade them "trot along" whilst he talked to Stella.

Rudolf Hastings bore no resemblance to his sister Sally. He was a remarkably handsome man of eight-and-twenty, with that rather peculiar air of finish in his dress and person which marks the Londoner; not the frequenter of the City, but the man whose occupations are carried on in the locality of Whitehall, Downing Street, and Westminster. His eyes were watchful and observant, his face wore an expression of quiet determination, his whole aspect gave the impression of resourcefulness and power. He was tall, and his frame was well-knit and well-proportioned, though in build it was rather slight. Stella regarded him with admiration, not entirely unmingled with awe. She had known Rudolf all her life. A rather peculiarly close tie bound them together; yet, for all that, she never saw him without a certain tremor and apprehension, which held in its scope elements both of joy and of pain.

"I did not know you were coming home, Rudolf," she said. "I saw Sally this morning, but she said nothing about it."

"Sally did not know. I arrived after she had gone out.

By-and-by, when I had told my news at home, I followed her, and she told me where you were to be found. I have something rather particular to discuss with you, Stella."

Her colour came and went; she looked very sweet in her conflict of feeling. Rudolf glanced at her, and his dark eyes lighted. He just put out his hand as though he would like to take hers and place it on his arm; but, after all, the quiet road was a public thoroughfare, and he was a man to whom demonstration was objectionable, so his hand dropped again.

"My news is this, Stella," he said. "Last week my eccentric old bachelor godfather died. Yesterday came the funeral, and the reading of the will. He had no near relations; none of his own name. He had always spoken of making me his heir, but I never allowed myself to reckon upon dead men's shoes—especially those of such an eccentric. But he has not changed his purpose. All that he had is to be mine. It is not great wealth, but it is, at least, modest affluence. The lawyer could not tell me exactly what the property was, but he said I might safely reckon that it would work out at not less than an income of a thousand a year, plus the quaint little old-fashioned house in Chelsea with its furniture and plenishings complete. With what my secretaryship brings me in, and what I make by my pen, we could start housekeeping any day now, Stella."

She started, and seemed to shrink a little away. Her face was all one deep rosy flush. Rudolf paused and looked at her steadily.

"Are you ready to come to me?" he asked.

"Oh, Rudolf! you have startled me so! What do you mean by ready? What is it that you want?"

"I want to put an end to this unsatisfactory state of affairs between us, Stella," he answered quietly; "I want it to be one thing or the other. Five years ago, when you were eighteen and I was twenty-three, I asked you if you would be my wife one day, and you said that you would—only you were too

young, and could not be spared from home just then. I was going to London to commence my life there. I very soon found out that you had been right. We were both too young. To have married then would have been folly. But I have always looked forward to it as the crown of my career when the way should open. I have always regarded you as my affianced wife, though you have never permitted me to announce our engagement openly. Why not, Stella?"

"Lady Caroline would be against it," faltered Stella; "I know she expects you to make a great match some day."

Rudolf was silent a moment; then he answered, with a smile:

"My mother will never hold out long against my wishes, if she sees that my happiness is involved."

"But it will be a bitter disappointment to her."

Again Rudolf paused for a moment before answering.

"You see, my mother has had disappointments with the girls. Geraldine has been so delicate since that attack of scarlet fever that there has been no chance of taking her for a season in town, and getting her married brilliantly, as till then had been reckoned upon. And poor Sally"—a half-laugh broke from the young man's lips—"well, for my part, I always find Sally immensely refreshing; but one can understand that she is not the sort of daughter my mother would care to produce and present in her own social circle in town. So, under the circumstances, it is natural that she should centre her ambitions in me; but, as I say, I will undertake to master her opposition. I am much more afraid of yours, Stella."

He looked her full in the face, and she quivered a little before him. She wrung her hands together nervously. There was appeal and distress in the face he was seeking to read.

"Yes, Stella," he repeated, "it is your opposition I fear most. When I spoke to you first, your answer was: 'When I can be spared.' It has been the same phrase constantly repeated ever since. When you spoke it first I was not afraid.

Your father had lately married again. Your brother was going out to the colonies in a year or two. You would soon be free of compelling ties. After I began to know more of life, I saw that an early marriage was often a mistake. I have not been impatient. Had it not been for this sudden stroke of good fortune, I should have waited yet longer. But this alters much—”

“Oh, Rudolf—why should it alter that? Why can you not wait longer still? How can I get away?”

“What holds you?” he asked quietly.

“Oh, so many, many things! There is my father—he depends on me in a hundred little ways. There is Edna—always ill, and often suffering. Nobody understands what to do for her like me. And the children—and the parish—oh, Rudolf! how could I leave them all?”

“In fact, Stella, everything and everybody is to be considered—except me?”

“You are cruel, Rudolf!” cried the girl, walking rapidly onwards; “you know I did not mean that!”

“What did you mean then, Stella?” he asked patiently. “That is what I should like you to explain.”

“Then I will!” she cried, bursting out almost fiercely. “Can you not understand that we who are young—we who have all our life before us—ought to wait, ought to sacrifice our own pleasure, our own happiness—for a while, at least—at the call of duty? What are we put here in our places for, but to serve? Duties grow up round us; we know that we are filling a sphere usefully. Are we to cast everything aside, just to be happy in our own way? You know I care for you, Rudolf! You know how you can tempt me by your words! But just because I want so much to be with you always—to do what you ask of me—I am afraid to do it! It is pleasing oneself; not doing that which is given us to do. Can’t you understand? I know I cannot put things cleverly; but I know what I feel. We are not to please ourselves. We are

to take the thorny road—not the broad and pleasant one. We must serve our apprenticeship, at least. We must deny ourselves. Rudolf, don't you understand? Don't you feel yourself that that is the highest?"

"I think that were you to marry me, Stella, you would find as many and as important duties grow up around you as training a village choir, or teaching in schools, or managing small parochial clubs, and so forth. My idea is that wherever we are, we find plenty to do; and that useful work is wanted all the world over."

"But your wife would have to lead a gay life too—a society life. Dinners, receptions, balls; oh, I know how your world lives. I should like it so much, Rudolf. I feel how I should delight in it. Nobody knows how I love beautiful things—lights, flowers, soft clothing, sumptuous living. I am afraid to think how I should revel in it all. But to leave my duties here—for that! Father, Edna, the children, the parish! Oh! you don't know all that I have to do and think of every day—"

She stopped, because Rudolf's face looked stern. She had known him all her life—he had been her childhood's hero and the idol of her girlhood; but she was a little afraid of him all the same, and when that look clouded his face she always trembled before it.

"Then, Stella, am I to understand that until the children are grown up, or until Mrs. Sinclair has recovered her health, and your father has retired from his living, you will not consent to be my wife, or to admit to the world that we are engaged?"

Stella was silent, battling with her feelings. She had a hurt sense (often experienced in Rudolf's presence), that the duties which to her were so all-important and compelling were lightly esteemed by him; that he took an unfair view of her position; that he failed to comprehend how each separate tie, in itself unimportant and even trivial, yet represented a small sphere

of usefulness, and that these ties multiplied together formed in the aggregate a bond of service which it would require great resolution to sever at a blow. She knew that anything could be made to sound ridiculous by a caustic tongue directed in a mocking spirit ; but to the girl there had always been something almost sacred in her earnest and conscientious discharge of her daily round of duties. She prayed for guidance even in trifles ; how much more in the greater issues of life. She was seeking to pray now—to see her way clearly ; but she was afraid to let herself go—to permit the compelling power of her love to gain the mastery. Duty must be the rule of life—and the sacrifice of self at its shrine.

Rudolf was speaking again now, in that very level and even voice of his which seemed to sting her spirit as with the lash of some invisible whip.

“I shall not try to override you, Stella. You have reached woman's estate. You should be able to judge for yourself. But I will for once present the matter as it appears to me. After that, you must settle for yourself what answer you make, and I will accept it as final. For something must be settled between us at last, one way or the other. Take your father first. He has a wife, who, though something of an invalid, is still capable of making his home-life comfortable, and being his companion in his hours of leisure. There are three little children, who, in my opinion, would be better looked after by a really capable nursery governess than by a very fully-occupied half-sister. There are hundreds and thousands of gently-born girls who would be thankful for the place, and might give Mrs. Sinclair what care she needs also. When you marry, your father could supply your place in this fashion without adding to his expenses. As to the parish, there are other persons to help in it. It would do Geraldine good to have a few outside interests ; and she could keep club accounts as well as anybody. As for Sally, if she were once pressed into the service, she might go and see outlying people, sick or

sound, and would cheer them up famously by her blunt speeches and malapropos remarks. There is Miss Lynne over yonder, whose hands are less full, no doubt, than they were. She would be a tower of strength. You would be missed, of course—you would not wish it otherwise. But you would find, Stella, as we all of us find in turn, though the discovery is not always very welcome—that no one in the world is indispensable, and Nature so abhors a vacuum that no sooner does one occur than it is promptly filled up somehow!”

He tried to smile as he concluded, but the smile was not altogether successful. Perhaps, had Rudolf at this point put his arms about Stella, told her that he loved her, and that he wanted her (which in truth he did badly), and had appealed to her love for him, he might even then have won the day. But, truth to tell, he was a little sore, and also a little doubtful of her. It seemed to him that had she loved him truly, she would not thus continue to hold back. Her scruples irritated him; her morbid craving after self-mortification (as he phrased it) was inexplicable to his more robust and masculine mind. A doubt of her affection for him had troubled him before this. Now, he told himself, he would bring matters to an issue. Either they should become engaged, with the prospect of speedy marriage, or—

He did not like to face the alternative even to himself. It was Stella who, swallowing down a great, choking sob, spoke the fateful words.

“I understand, Rudolf. I am not necessary to you or to anyone. Perhaps I am foolish to think I am wanted anywhere. But, at least, I have duties to fulfil at home, and I do not see how I can give them all up at a moment’s notice. You will soon find the vacuum in your heart—if there be one—fill up. We have never been engaged, and this had better be the end. I don’t think I could make you happy. We see life with such different eyes. You will be a big man soon.

You ought to marry such a woman as your mother would choose for you—rich, beautiful, distinguished. I should hate to be a bone of contention between you. Things have changed, and we had better say good-bye. It isn't as though it would make any talk or stir. It was just between ourselves—and now it is over."

She turned round upon him and faced him as she spoke. The tears had dried in her eyes with the heat of her excitement. He had never seen her look so attractive in her life before, for he had seldom seen her moved to anger. For one moment it came over him that there was more in Stella than he had fancied, with all his previous love. For one moment he longed to hold her in his arms, and compel her to speak differently by the force of his own masterful will, the strength and tenacity of which he well knew. But he paused—he was proud too—and he hated to seem to ask more than was offered. The psychological moment passed, and the leaping flame died down to cold ashes.

"Is that your decision, Stella?"

"Yes, Rudolf. I think you know it is a wise one."

"At least I bow to your superior wisdom," he answered, with a touch of either bitterness or mockery in his tone, she could not tell which.

She turned from him and hurried homewards by the river-side road, and he wheeled about and walked rapidly away in an opposite direction, not heeding whither his steps were bent, till he found himself once more by the rustic bridge which would take him to the gardens of Convent House. He had but to vault the gate, as he had done at will from boyhood, and he would be within those quiet precincts which had always held so great a charm for him.

He felt a sudden desire to see Miss Lynne—whose pet he had been in his babyhood, and who always had a soft spot in her heart for him, although he had so long arrived at man's estate.

He did not, however, march through the garden in Sally's unceremonious fashion, but circled through the outer shrubberies, and made formal entrance by way of the front door, being ushered into Esther's presence just as she was about to sit down to her solitary lunch.

So they sat and lunched together, and he told her of the good thing which had come to him, and of his prospects in general, and his private ambitions, of which, to most persons, he was reticent of speaking.

"You know my chief is in the Cabinet now. He is good enough to set some store by my services, and he employs me in all his most confidential correspondence. It gives one a grip of the under-world of politics, if you understand me, which is illuminating, to say the least of it. He has spoken to me more than once of standing for some constituency. Until yesterday I did not see how this could be done without putting my father to greater expense than I cared to do. But this changes everything. I suppose I could afford it, though I am not quite certain yet. Anyhow, I don't mind telling you, Miss Lynne, that it is my ambition to write M.P. after my name, though I have never let myself dream too much of it hitherto."

Rudolf had, by this time, talked himself into a happier frame of mind. Esther's ready sympathy and quick responsiveness were soothing; and also from the fact that for years she had read the *Times* and other newspapers almost from end to end to her father, she had acquired a wider range of interest, and more definite information and appreciation of the questions of the day and the political outlook than was at all common with women not actually in the swim of public life. Her opinions were worth listening to, when she advanced them; for they were the outcome of patient observation and much quiet thought. Rudolf had been struck by this before; he was struck by it anew to-day. In his manner towards Esther there was a pretty touch of chivalrous deference. As a little

boy, he had liked to play at being "her knight-errant." Something of the old feeling lingered yet. Both felt it, and it touched a chord in each heart.

"If only she were five-and-twenty years younger!" Rudolf thought.

In the boudoir, over their coffee (there was no such coffee anywhere as was served in Convent House, he declared), Esther spoke of the change she was looking for in her life.

"Sally just mentioned that you expected a niece. I hope it is going to be a niece whose presence will be a source of pleasure to you. All modern girls would not fit into the life of Convent House;" and they looked at each other and smiled.

"I do not think she will fit in one little bit," answered Esther, with a laugh; and when she laughed her face looked almost young again. "Yet, all the same, I want her. I am glad she is coming, though she is very modern, Rudolf, and even Sally sits open-mouthed at some of her sayings and doings!"

"Ay, Sally is more the hoyden common to all generations than the product of our modern civilisation," answered Rudolf. "I'm not sure that at heart Sally is not a bit of a Puritan, in spite of her enthusiasm for games of every sort and kind. The games are the fashion of the day grafted upon the old stock. Do you know what I mean?"

"I think so. I always feel that Sally has the makings of a fine woman in her. I hope I may say the same of my Diana. Did Sally tell you what a beautiful creature she is?"

"What is her name?" asked Rudolf suddenly.

"Diana Conquest. Why, Rudolf, do you know her? Of course it is possible. She has been some time in London. But London is such a big place. It had not occurred to me to ask before."

"A big place—and a very small one too. Sometimes I feel it remarkably small. Yes, I have met Miss Conquest. She

appeared in our world rather like a meteor, last November. I suppose I have been some half-dozen times in her society. Once I danced with her—”

“She never told me. I mean, she never seemed to have any association with the name of Hastings.”

“She would never remember. I was only one of a multitude. For she made a bit of a splash when she appeared. They say she has a big fortune. She is extremely handsome, and has plenty to say for herself. I was never much more entertained than I was the half-hour we talked and danced together. Fancy finding that dazzling young creature at Convent House!”

“You must help to entertain her, Rudolf. I am sometimes half afraid of her finding the life here intolerably dull.”

“Well, you see, since the end of January nothing has been going on anywhere. Besides, I do not think Miss Conquest will let herself be dull in any company. Miss Lynne, you will be quite gay in this part of the world before long. Have you heard that Sir Humphrey Vanborough is coming home?”

“No; is he?”

“Well, likely to come home, I should say. His time is up, and he has retired—worse luck for the district, as all say. He is going to show Archie Vanborough some sport up in the hills. He went out last autumn to join him. You know Archie—a cousin or something of the old boy’s—a fellow born with a silver spoon in his mouth; but a fine young fellow for all that. Well, they’re out there together now; but will probably be home in the course of a few months; and I expect he’ll come back to his own house here, for a spell, at least, before he makes any further arrangements.”

Esther’s eyes were bright; a soft and tender smile curved her lips. Rudolf looked keenly at her for a moment, and then said to himself:

“Lucky fellow, Sir Humphrey Vanborough!”

CHAPTER V

INTRODUCTIONS

“ESTHER, I am not going to let you wear that cap any longer ! You are much too pretty to make a frump of yourself ! Come here and sit down, whilst I work my sovereign will upon you ! Oh, you needn’t look so askance at me. I know what I am about. You shall keep your style ; it suits you ; but it just wants a touch here and there to transform you, and make you younger.”

“Diana, my dear, I am fifty.”

“And you are old-fashioned enough to think fifty old, I dare say. Don’t you know women call themselves girls, or like to be called so, till they are any age you like to mention nowadays ? I tell you, Esther, I went not long ago to see a girls’ hockey match out Hendon way. I had a good look at the ‘girls.’ I vow that one or two of them would never see forty-five again ! Grey hair and gouty feet ! Oh ! I’m not mocking at the infirmities of age ; but I do say that I don’t admire to see them playing the fool that way, when the sere and yellow leaf is falling upon them ! I felt frightfully inclined to set up a board with the inscription, ‘Hockey for ancient hens.’ Some pastimes women can keep up gracefully with advancing years, but in my opinion hockey isn’t one of these. I think it’s a frightful game for girls at any time—straddle-bugs I call them, when I see them at it ! I really couldn’t make such a figure of myself as they do. Perhaps that’s my vanity. That’s how I feel, anyhow.”

Diana had arrived at Convent House upon the previous

evening, bag and baggage ; and very much bag and baggage had there been ! She herself had laughed at the bulk and number of her possessions as they were brought from the luggage-cart.

“ You’ll find me rather a large order, I fear, Esther ! ” she had exclaimed. “ Now, say out if your heart fails you at the prospect ! I’ll cart myself away somewhere else if it does.”

But here was Diana, very much at home already in that quaint, large bed-chamber, low-ceiled and of irregular shape, (with charming cupboards and hanging closets set in deep recesses, which had accommodated even her voluminous wardrobe), giving glimpses through the open door of that adjoining room beyond, equally large and quaint, cosy and home-like, with its glowing fire, its warm, soft hangings, its wealth of flowers culled and arranged by loving hands, and those nicknacks that she herself had added to its plenishings, which made it already seem her very own.

Now, with deft and skilful fingers, she was trying her art upon Esther’s waving silvery locks. She had the air of one exceedingly at home in her surroundings. Already there was a touch of playful imperiousness in her manner towards her aunt, as though this young madam had been used rather to command than to obey.

“ I’m going to have the world admire you as I do myself, Esther. You’re perfectly sweet, and I mean everybody to know it. Oh, you needn’t protest or blush—girls don’t blush nowadays ; but you are so refreshingly old-world ! you have the sweetest brown eyes, just like a dachsy dog, you know ! I wish mine were brown. Grey is so commonplace. I like mine best when I get into a rage, and they turn yellow—like a tiger’s ! I wonder why I can’t make them do it at other times. I like people’s eyes to match their hair ; it gives a kind of finish to their appearance. It’s tiresome ; one’s eyes are so baffling. One can get hair and complexion, and even a nose to order pretty much now ; but one has to stick to the eyes that Nature

has given one, however badly the dear old lady may have blundered over them ! ”

“ Di, Di, you are a sad rattlepate ! ”

“ No, indeed ; only modern, with the latest up-to-date ideas. Now, Esther, come and look at yourself. I’ve had you in my mind’s eye all these last days, and have overhauled all the best hair-dressers’ shops for the right combs for you. White hair is just the loveliest in the world, when it is all silvery and glossy and wavy, like yours. It’s the grizzly, dull stage that one funks. Now see ; what do you think of yourself, eh ? I want to make you a little more vain ; you’re just a trifle too like a mediæval nun—all spirit and no flesh.”

Esther looked, and could not forbear a little smile. The change was so subtle and skilful that she could scarcely define it, and yet it seemed to have brought back some of her vanished youth. The soft waves of hair were just a little raised and re-arranged, so as to produce a softening and more *negligée* effect. The little lace cap had been superseded by some arrangement of tortoiseshell, and the abundant coils formed a coronet which gave her added height and dignity.

“ There ! you are a real Queen Esther, and any Ahasuerus would be pleased and proud to hold out his golden sceptre to you ! I hope you appreciate my self-denial in all this ! for nobody with any real sense of true beauty will look at me whilst you are by. I shall be the discarded Vashti, and you the honoured Queen Esther ! Well, I must confess my sympathies always were with Vashti. An Eastern woman gifted with spunk ought to have been better appreciated ! ”

She linked her arm within Esther’s, and led her away from the mirror, not permitting her to touch or alter anything. They had come in from an early walk round the little estate which owned Esther’s sway, and Diana’s interest had been only equalled by her ignorance with regard to English country life. As they descended to the hall, they saw the butler crossing it to the front door, and pausing a moment on the

landing to let the visitors enter, Diana saw that these were a tall and rather stately-looking lady, with a young man in attendance, who looked as though he might be her son, for there was some similarity in their gait and carriage, if not in their features.

"Who are they?" whispered she to her aunt.

"Lady Caroline Hastings and her son. I thought she might perhaps call. I have known her ever since her marriage, thirty years ago. She knew your mother, Diana."

They followed their guests into the drawing-room, where the new-comer was duly presented. She towered over Lady Caroline in a fashion to which that tall and upright dame was scarcely accustomed; but the vivid beauty of the face riveted her eyes, and she held the girl's hand rather long, gazing earnestly at her, and turning to Esther, exclaimed:

"It is Arabella over again—and yet with a difference!"

"It must be with a difference," answered Diana, speaking for herself, "for my father always told me I was a Conquest to my finger-tips. But I suppose I am like my mother, too; only she was such a fragile flower—at least, when I remember her—and there is not anything fragile about me!"

"I want to introduce Mr. Rudolf Hastings, my dear. But he tells me he has been introduced before, though he does not suppose you will remember him."

The girl faced round upon him at once, searching his face with her eyes. They were almost exactly of a height, he having the advantage of perhaps half an inch.

"I ought to remember you," she said reflectively; "I used to try and keep an inventory of the men I met. There were those I wanted to take on my knee when I talked to them, or put them in my pocket out of the way when they bored me. There were those whose heads were just below my eyes—the tops of their heads I mean—so that I was impelled to study the partings of their hair and guess what sort of bear's grease they used. Then there were those one could talk to

comfortably—like you, for instance; and the tall men one could look up at. These formed a very small class. I declare I believe there are more six-foot girls than men to be met with hereabouts. I sort of seem to know your face; but truly I never could figure to keep all the names in my head!”

“That would be too much to expect of anyone—least of all anyone so crowded out with partners as you were at Lady Molyneux’s dance. The wonder was that I got any chance at all.”

“Oh, I declare, I believe I’ve got you now! Say, aren’t you one of the clever sort? Aren’t you a bit of a rising light—write slashing articles or something—and are going to get into Parliament one of these days, and set the Thames, or the House, or something on fire!”

“Well, I’ve a notion that both the Thames and the Houses of Parliament will survive the brilliance of my career,” returned Rudolf gravely, “and I’m a long way from being a member of the legislature yet. But politics is my trade, if that’s what you mean, Miss Conquest. I’ve got my foot on the ladder, and I mean to mount.”

“That’s right—you stick to that!” she answered. “I call the politics of this country pretty rotten—all talk and talk, and nothing done! I suppose men are made that way, and can’t help it. But never mind what it is you’ve got hold of, you go ahead, and come out top. That’s the secret of success—if it’s only to be a stuffy old Cabinet Minister at the end. I’d never be content with anything but the top rung of the ladder if I were a man. Though politics would be about the last show I’d try to run. I should have been out in Africa a year ago if I’d been a man. I just tingled all over to go. I tell you, Ladysmith wouldn’t have been starving all that time if I’d been a general over yonder!” and her eyes flashed, the yellow light leaping into them, till for a moment hair and eyes matched in tint, though she did not know it or think of it.

"You have confidence in yourself, Miss Conquest," Rudolf said.

"Of course I have. It's not much good having confidence in anybody else in these degenerate days. I'm fair sick of muddles and vacillation and talky-talky—in Parliament and out. The country is staunch; the men are fine fellows; but at headquarters—pouf! The War Office wants hanging; Parliament is just a lot of old women—fuddling along about education and goodness knows what—pampering the people when they want making into men, and wondering where our next generals are to come from. Bobs and Kitchener can't last for ever, and with this grandmothering and coddling and feather-bed sort of legislation, I wonder what England is going to come to. I feel I'd like to make a clean sweep, and run the whole show myself! I'd make them sit up some!"

"I remember you made a good many people sit up at Lady Molyneux's when last we met," spoke Rudolf, smiling beneath his moustache; "home truths were quite at a discount that night at supper. A good many persons went away with a flea in their ear—as the saying is—to whom such a thing must be a rare experience."

"Yes; I think I remember. My monkey was up about something that night. It's an active little animal, my monkey, and does not lie low very long at any time. I've come here to give it a bit of a rest. It won't do to wear it out too young."

"No; that would be a pity; and I can believe that a little rest will be healthful for it."

Rudolf was as grave as a judge, but there was lurking humour in his glance. Diana saw it, and laughed.

"Well, I admit I have rather a beast of a temper," she remarked, with engaging candour. "I fancy it's a form of temper when I feel like slashing right and left all round me—no matter whom I hit. People in this blessed country seem to me so timid, so cautious, so afraid of responsibility, so

namby-pamby, if you know what I mean ! I can't just find the right words ; but I feel it all through me—to my bones ! There's sparkle and froth ; but there's no backbone. If you shake them, they just seem to come to pieces in your hands. That makes me want to worry 'em all the worse."

Rudolf looked reflectively at her, as she stood flushed and radiant in the pride of her overflowing vitality. He partly understood, and he partly sympathised. His calling in life was one that had opened his eyes to the corroding action of pink-tapeism in legislation, and the strangling of great issues in the superabundance of petty detail, the clogging of the wheels of government by the very desire to take each side issue into consideration, and please everybody, instead of pressing forward to the goal with the courage of single-mindedness and patriotism. What he felt in great matters was, he knew, copied and reflected in almost every condition of life. A condition of affairs existed which was flabby and flaccid. This girl had felt it, and it had roused her scorn. Her scorn she was disposed to dispense without much mercy upon mankind in general. He felt that she was trying to take his measure in order to treat him to what she decided was his due. It was a sensation not devoid of novelty and piquancy, and the young man was prepared to enjoy it.

But before any further passage-of-arms could take place, two figures were suddenly seen approaching the long window, beside which Rudolf and Diana were standing. They looked quickly at them, and the girl exclaimed at once :

"There is Sally !"

"Yes, Sally unmistakably !" he replied, noting the short skirt, the muddy boots, and the inevitable hockey-stick ; "Sally come for a cup of tea to a drawing-room where she will not be scolded for her appearance in such a garb. Miss Lynne has spoiled us all from our babyhood upward. Is she going to try her hand upon you, Miss Conquest ?"

Diana smiled without answering ; her eyes were upon the advancing pair. She asked a counter-question.

"Who is the other one?"

"Miss Sinclair—Stella Sinclair, the Rector's daughter. Perhaps you have heard of her. She is a very important factor in Cleethorpe."

"She is very pretty," said Diana, and opened the window for them, stepping out into the little quaint porch-like shelter which abutted upon this angle of the house.

"Come along, Sally ; come and have some tea !" she cried out, in her clear, imperious tones ; "I am going to call you Sally from the start, and you may call me anything you choose. When people like me, they call me Di ; when they pretend they like me, and are really cross, they say Diana ; when they are downright furious, and make no pretence of friendship, then they say Di-an-a Conquest. So that's how the land lies in this quarter ; you can pay your money and take your choice !"

"I shall choose Di !" cried Sally, whirling her stick affectionately round Diana's head, which with her was a mark of endearment. "I'm going to like you just awfully, I know. You're so tremendously pretty for one thing, and so huge ! I wish I was as tall ! I could do such heaps of things ! I wonder if you're as strong as I am, though ! Let me see if I can put you down. You've got the height ; but I rather think I've got the muscle !"

Diana laughed, and held up her hands for the trial, which ended, after a pretty good tussle, in a victory for Sally.

"It's not fair," said the vanquished, "you're just made of steel, and I've been getting soft in London ; but one of these days I'll best you yet !"

"I believe you will !" cried Sally. "Oh, yes, you shall get into training here. It isn't half a bad place for that. We've got a hockey club and a golf club, and good links, too. And then tennis—we've an asphalt court, and can play all the

winter, and I'm really rather cottoning to croquet at last! It took me some time to make up my mind to it; but really it's not half a bad game when you've got over the first feeling of scorn. Do you play ping-pong? I haven't seen it yet; but people say it's going to catch on like fun! I'm rather a dab at billiards, and we've a good table too. When Rudolf's at home we have fine battles. He can beat me still, generally; but he doesn't have to give me points now; and sometimes, once in a blue moon, I beat. If you play, and we have matches together, perhaps I'll go one better than him before long. Wouldn't that be a lark? I wonder if Rudolf would care about being beaten. I think he's rather one of the sort who think men should have things all their own way."

She gave a comical look at her brother, who was standing beside Stella, exchanging commonplaces with her. Stella's face was flushed, and her hazel eyes looked curiously bright, almost as though they were sparkling through tears. If Sally had been observant, she might have guessed that something was the matter; but as it was, she remained happily oblivious, and called to Stella to come and be introduced to Diana, whom she ought to be dying to know if she wasn't.

"Stella is the good girl of the place, and I'm the naughty one," cried Sally. "She does all the work, and I do all the play. She scolds me for being idle and frivolous, and I abuse her for being a paragon. We're always quarrelling over something; but we manage to make it up again, and scramble along somehow. Tea? Oh, rather! I'm as thirsty as a fish, and as hungry as a hunter. Oh, I say, I didn't know mother was here! I won't come too far into view. Just let me have my portion somewhere out here, where I can keep my dirty boots from the maternal vision. Rudolf won't betray me; he's a jewel of a boy!"

By this time, Diana had become acutely aware of something strained in the situation; nor did she, with her quick intuitions, take long to discover the cause. Stella was

palpitating all over, and only smiled rather vaguely, and gave random answers to the observations addressed to her. Rudolf had grown grave, and just a little stiff in his manner. He was engaged in bringing tea over to the girls gathered about the window, and having done this, he retired to the rug, and, cup in hand, joined in the conversation between the elder ladies, talking with a brilliance which attracted Diana's attention, and kept her mind divided between the two groups, though she retained her seat near to the window.

"Are they secret lovers? Or what is it?" she asked herself. "I must find that out by hook or by crook. It is entertaining to be pitchforked into quite a new world—and a little one—where one has time to get interested in the people, and watch what goes on. Till one has a hand of one's own to play, it's quite amusing to see how others are playing the game. I'm not quite sure that she is good enough for him; but then she's all in a twitter just now. I'll take her measure better another day."

Sally was taken home by Lady Caroline in the carriage, and rather to Diana's surprise, her son accompanied them also. This confirmed her suspicion that if he and Stella were lovers, it was either secretly, or else there was something "up" between them. Stella had several small parish matters to discuss with Esther, and Diana freely offered them advice, which convulsed her aunt, and broke up Stella's little nervous fear of this tall and beautiful stranger, so that when Diana offered to walk down to the river with her on her departure, she assented quite gratefully.

"You shall set me to work one of these days in your parish," she said. "I'll tell you one thing I can do—I can get along with boys, and I can keep little kids amused by the hour together. Those are my special gifts and graces. I can sing, too—you shall hear me in church one of these days. I'll shout down all your boys together if they sing out of tune. I'll drown the whole show—so now, you know! I can't stand

dawling out of tune. I'll keep them up to the mark, you bet ! ”

By the time the bridge was reached, and Diana said good-bye, Stella was half fascinated, half alarmed, by Esther Lynne's niece. As for Diana, as she turned away and skirted the bank of the stream for a stroll before returning to the house, she said to herself :

“ Rather a ‘ papa, prunes, prism ’ little miss ; but not a bad sort really, I daresay. Wonder if I shall have to take her in hand as well as Esther and Sally ? ”

Diana's feet were fleet. Soon she had entered the long, straight yew avenue that had taken her fancy from the first. It was almost dark here, beneath the dense gloom of the ancient trees. She stood looking up it, with a smile upon her lips.

“ I wonder how soon Sir Humphrey Vanborough will come back,” she said to herself. “ Somehow, I feel rather interested in that man. I rather want to see him.”

Suddenly she gave a great start. Somewhere near to the farther end of the dusky walk a ghostlike apparition seemed to detach itself, and flit with perfect silence across to the other side. It appeared to be a dim figure, with white about the head, the rest all indistinct and grey.

“ A coifed and veiled nun ! ” cried Diana to herself, half frightened, half laughing, as she suddenly turned and sped towards the house. “ Esther did not warn me that the yew walk was haunted. But what would a house like this be without its ghost ? ”

CHAPTER VI

NUN'S BOWER

DIANA had been a fortnight in her new home, and she felt as though she had been there six months. Already her presence at Convent House was felt in a number of little significant ways. The dinner hour was changed by nearly an hour; and had Esther not stood firm, Diana would have coaxed her to breakfast later also. But, as it was, she only succeeded in delaying the conclusion of that meal by her late appearance at it. She was always promising to amend her ways, and to turn over a new leaf, and come down to prayers; but so far there had been small indication of improvement in this respect.

"Your feather beds are so delicious, and your soft air is so soporific, that really I can't make up my mind to get up!" she would declare, "and after all, what does it matter? The day is long enough for all we have to put into it. When I've got a motive, I can rise with the lark. You shall see one of these days."

And Esther forbore to ask whether pleasing her, or conforming to the rules of the house, or joining in that simple act of dedication morning by morning, were not motive sufficient. Esther had already realised that she had to deal with a complex nature, with an imperious will, with an ambitious temperament, in which the organ of rule was very strongly developed. Diana might be led through her affections; she would never be driven or coerced. She was engaged at present in taking by storm the small world of Cleethorpe, and was extracting sufficient amusement therefrom

to keep her in gay spirits, and make of her a most amusing companion, though one who could be somewhat overpowering at times.

Already she had established the pleasantest possible relations between herself and Squire Hastings' family. Sally was by way of adoring her, in her brusque and rather uncouth fashion. Lady Caroline had welcomed her with warmth to come to and fro at will to Bishop's Hall; and so long as Rudolf was at home, Diana had been engaged in a billiard tournament there, hastily organised by the indefatigable Sally, in which she had carried off the prize, after some most exciting matches, and had since been playing constantly with the son of the house and his sisters, and making herself quite at home in their society. Geraldine, the delicate elder sister, took almost the same liking for Diana that Sally had done. She brought a new element into the place; she was so gay, so handsome, so daring. Squire Hastings was a man of whom many people stood in some awe, but Diana knew not the meaning of the word. She teased him, flattered him, coaxed him, from the first moment of their introduction. She made him show her over his model farm; she insisted on having every horse trotted out for her inspection; she went into raptures over the dairy cows, and the tottering, butting calves; she declared the little pigs were "perfectly sweet," and that she would like to have half a dozen to run about with her. She even made friends with the sullen old mastiff, who, as a rule, would accept caresses from no one but his master. She listened to all the Squire's hunting stories with keenest delight, and swore him over to let her ride to hounds with him so soon as the season should come again.

"I can ride. I've always ridden, since I was a baby child in 'Ole Virginie.' But I've never hunted in the English fashion. You shall teach me the trick! I won't disgrace you—I promise you that. I am huntress by name and huntress by nature!"

"That is a very attractive girl," spoke Squire Hastings to his wife about this time; "now, if I were a young man like Rudolf—"

The Squire was voicing what had already occurred to Lady Caroline herself. Diana had a considerable fortune, she knew; also, she was Esther Lynne's nearest blood relative, and Convent House marched, as the saying is, with the estate of Bishop's Hall. Also Rudolf was a rising man, and could afford now to think of marrying.

Lady Caroline had sometimes felt a little uneasy lest Stella Sinclair's prettiness should catch Rudolf's fancy. They had been intimate always; he had played champion to her from childhood; but the mother had not troubled herself much about this hitherto, believing that London life would soon bring Rudolf into easy relations with brilliant and beautiful women, who would quickly efface any impression made upon him by the Rector's daughter at Cleethorpe. But though several years had passed, Rudolf made no sign as yet of having seriously contemplated matrimony. His work stood first in his interests, it seemed, and he was disposed to regard women rather as pawns in the game of politics than as possible wives for men such as himself. He seemed to have plenty of friends amongst the daughters of the men of his world; but not a hint had he dropped as yet about any thought of taking to himself a wife. Hitherto, prudential scruples might have restrained him; but now that moderate affluence was his, he could please himself in the matter. And if his heart were not entangled somewhere in London, could he do better than think of Diana Conquest? So the girl was made a very welcome guest at Bishop's Hall, and the Squire took more notice of her than he had been known to do of any girl friend of his daughters all these years.

It was of the Squire that Diana asked a question she had been desirous to put to Esther herself, and yet which she had never actually dared to voice. With all her gentleness, there

was a quiet dignity and a delicate reserve and reticence about Esther of which at moments Diana became keenly conscious, and which occasionally quenched her eager exuberance and checked the expression of her curiosity.

“Humphrey Vanborough! Bless my soul, yes! No doubt about it, he wanted Esther—wanted her badly, poor lad! We were both lads together in those days. I’m not sure that I wasn’t a bit sweet on Esther myself; though I always knew I’d not the ghost of a chance against him. But you see, the mother was dead, and the father began to fail; curious case his; sort of disease that baffled doctors completely; seemed to affect every organ, and yet he went on living, living, living, till one could scarcely believe it when he died! Oh, yes, what was I saying? Well, of course, it was pretty plain that one daughter would have to stop with him. Thirty years ago, my dear, young women didn’t go howling about the world for a vocation; but they stopped at home and did their duty there—though sometimes it came hard upon them—as it did upon Esther Lynne.

“We thought it was she and Humphrey who would make the match of it; but suddenly your father appeared, and, hey presto!—before any of us could look round, he and pretty Arabella had made a match of it—almost a runaway affair that was. But Esther stood by them loyally; would never have a word spoken against it. She was not exactly engaged herself—it was the sort of thing that one understood rather than heard discussed. He was away when that happened. Perhaps she wrote to him. I don’t know. Anyhow, he kept away for a long while. His visits were very few afterwards. His father would go out to him sometimes, and spend the winter in India; and now and again Humphrey came home, but was very little here. I fancy it went deep with him; but he’s not a man to wear his heart upon his sleeve. I suppose when he did come he saw how it was with Esther—how impossible it would be for her to act differently. And his career took

him of necessity to the ends of the earth—as it seemed then.”

“And so Esther was sacrificed!” flashed out Diana. “Well, I never did see why one person’s life should be sacrificed to another. I’d very soon see that mine wasn’t, I know! In fact, it’s two lives to one. It’s not fair. I always say that it’s the good people of the world who make the most fearful muddles! Well, I’ve no morbid craving after self-immolation, thank goodness! I mean to live and enjoy life, and do something with it. You shall see!”

But for all that, Diana showed a little extra spice of affection towards Esther on her return home, and not infrequently brought the subject of conversation round to Sir Humphrey Vanborough, asking questions about him, and familiarising herself with the story of his distinguished career, the details of which Esther seemed to have by heart, though always speaking with great calmness and no self-consciousness upon the subject.

A wet afternoon gave the girl the chance she had been waiting for.

“One can’t stay indoors all day!” she cried; “and one can’t go very far. But do take me to Nun’s Bower; you promised you would once! We shall be quite sheltered through the yew walk, and I want to see Sir Humphrey’s house and its treasures. He may be coming home soon now; there’s no knowing. Let’s go and have a prowling round. Do—there’s a darling!”

Esther was easily persuaded. They were soon traversing the wide yew walk, where the equinoctial gales swayed the great trees overhead, and made a wild sort of music. Diana looked keenly about her for any passing glimpse of a coiled nun; but saw no indication of any ghostlike figure. She had, indeed, almost forgotten the apparition she had seen—real or fancied—and she had not spoken of it to anyone so far. She had a healthy mind, and was not easily alarmed either by

concrete or supposititious terrors. And at this moment she was engrossed in the interest of inspecting the outside of Sir Humphrey Vanborough's house, which, as they passed through the gate at the end—of which Esther had a key—became clearly visible to her, though it was a good deal smothered by the density of the shrubbery, which had considerably encroached of late years.

And yet, how beautiful that shrubbery was ! Just one mass of glossy rhododendrons and outdoor azaleas, some of which were in bloom—the rhododendrons, that is—whilst all showed promise of the wealth of blossom which soon would be, and already the air was scented by the breath of violets, which made a thick under-carpet along the many cunningly-cut walks and paths.

“Mr. Vanborough had very little glass ; but he delighted in such things as grow hardily. His roses and lilies, his violets and flowering shrubs, were always the great feature of his garden. But it looks rather wild now. Burchell is getting old, and he does not keep things quite as they should be kept. But it will hearten him up if he hears that the master really is likely to come home. He and his wife live in the house, in an offshoot, that is, connected with the main block by a passage. The old fragment of the ecclesiastical building is quite small, and very ancient. Mr. Vanborough's grandfather, when he bought the property, built more commodious quarters for the servants, keeping the old house intact for his own use. But we must go round to the back door to get in. I do not think they will hear us if we try the front entrance.”

It was a very strange old house. Diana gazed wonderingly at it. Small though it was, it was built round a small courtyard, in the centre of which an ancient fountain stood, with the signs of the zodiac deeply cut along the rim. None of the windows of the rooms looked into this small square enclosure, but only the windows, small and narrow, and heavily mullioned, of the upper and lower corridors, which ran completely round

like a covered cloister way. The rooms all faced outwards, looking south and west and east. The northern side of the small quadrangle was almost entirely swallowed up in the entrance-hall and fine staircase, which was evidently more modern than the ancient structure itself, though it probably dated back over two hundred years. There were other small, twisted staircases at the angles of the building, leading from the lower to the upper corridor.

"I call it a fascinating place!" cried Diana, as she ran up the stairs, and careered right round the upper gallery till she reached the head of the staircase again, where Esther and Mrs. Burchell still stood talking. Esther's face was a little flushed. She was reading a letter that the housekeeper had given her. As the girl advanced upon them with many exclamations of delight, she folded the letter and gave it back.

"Then you will be expecting him back early in May? That is sooner than you thought last time I saw you."

"Yes, ma'am. He spoke of going hunting, or something, with young Mr. Vanborough, and I expected from that that they would be a goodish while away. But I think he's changed his plans a bit. Perhaps the sick gentleman he speaks of, who is coming back with him, has to come home before it gets too hot. Well, I'll be right glad to welcome Sir Humphrey home—that I will. I was afraid he'd maybe taken to wandering ways, and would never come here no more."

Diana was keenly interested. Sir Humphrey coming back in about six weeks from this; two months at the outside! And not coming alone, either, as it seemed; for they spoke of young Mr. Vanborough and this Colonel York as accompanying him. Diana remembered the name of the soldier. He had done something rather specially gallant, and had been dangerously wounded. But nobody thought of anything just now except what was going on in South Africa, which seemed, perhaps, a little unfair, she decided. It would be, at any rate,

a variety to have some masculine element imported into the place. Since Rudolf Hastings had gone back, this element had been decidedly lacking, and Diana rather missed it. She had been used to men all her life, from being her father's constant companion.

"Hen society is very improving, I don't doubt," she had once remarked to the admiring Sally; "but it's just a trifle monotonous, especially when all the hens are such virtuous fowls! Schools, choir, clothing club—clothing club, choir, schools! I know it all by heart now. I'm going to have a go at that choir one of these days! I'll teach those little beggars to sing through their mouths, and not through their noses! I am being slowly, but surely, engulfed in the vortex of the righteous parish! I feel it coming upon me. I am like Andromeda, chained to the rock. The monster is calmly and inevitably approaching! We badly want a Perseus here to come and set us free!"

But she did not say this to Esther, and now, when she exclaimed, "Perseus to the rescue—as I live!" her aunt regarded her with looks of questioning amusement.

"Never mind what I mean. Show me the house first; we can talk afterwards. This gallery is a perfect museum of Oriental treasures in the matter of heavenly vases and the most demoniacal-looking weapons, and a few monstrosities in the way of idols. Now take me to see the rooms. I'm sure Sir Humphrey must be a man of ideas; one can see it in the things he has sent home."

The rooms were curious and very quaint, interlocking, and with odd angles and bows and projections. There were doors of communication one from the other, as well as the doors opening upon the gallery that ran all round the house. During his long sojourn in India, Sir Humphrey had amassed a vast collection of curios and beautiful fabrics and Oriental treasures of every sort. Brass, ivory, silver, feather work, embroidery, pottery—all had its place there, cunningly disposed to the

greatest advantage, and arranged with the care and taste, which showed that some loving hands had been at work there.

"It seems a shame to leave such exquisite things about in a house that is not inhabited," said Diana, as she roamed from room to room enchanted.

"Yes, miss, so it do," answered Mrs. Burchell, "but what are we to do? The costliest stuffs are put away in chests and cupboards, and the jewels and the gold ornaments are at the bank. But the house is just crammed full, as you see it, of these heathenish odds and ends, and where to put them away I shouldn't know. So they just stop where they are, and I look after them as best I can. We don't have a lot of dust here, standing right away from the road, and the sun don't get in to hurt them, as I keep the blinds down. But I'll be glad to see the master back, that I will, and then things will be properly done inside and out, as they should."

Mrs. Burchell was delighted to have anyone to talk to, for her life was a lonely one, and her husband was rather deaf, and spent most of his time pottering about out of doors. She invited the ladies to take a cup of tea in her pleasant kitchen, where the glow of the fire was reflected in the shining brasses and the spotless tin and delf ware on the shelves. Nor was her tea to be despised, nor the cakes of her own baking produced from her stores. But Diana, who was not specially interested in local gossip, such as their hostess delighted in, slipped presently away, saying that she wanted another prowling round the house; and after finding herself quickly in the main hall, from which a passage opened to these modern kitchen regions, she began a more detailed survey of the beautiful contents of the rooms upon the lower floor, which contained the bulk of the more costly and curious articles collected. Dining-room, library and study, all had their share of treasures, though they boasted solid and antiquated furniture as well, carved, and upholstered for the most part in stamped leather. But the two large rooms, one facing south and the

other east, which had plainly been the drawing-rooms of the house, were almost like Eastern rooms themselves, with divans, rich embroideries, ornaments of every description jumbled up together in the quaintest fashion, yet presenting a remarkably harmonious whole.

Diana examined them curiously, and presently paused, somewhat puzzled to account for the absence of dust in the neighbourhood of a certain Hindoo idol, and also, when she looked further, she saw distinct traces of finger-marks upon the thin layer of dust which lay over surrounding objects.

"Have I been fingering things? Esther certainly didn't, and good Mrs. Burchell's thick, stumpy fingers never left traces so fine," mused Diana, with her head on one side. "Well, it's no particular business of mine. I needn't try and play Sherlock Holmes for the elucidation of mares' nests. I'll run upstairs and prowl through the bedrooms again. It's a delightful house, just bogey enough to be fascinating, without being too big, and lonely, and weird. I like it immensely. Nun's Bower—well, I'd not so much mind being a nun to live in a place like this. How dark it is getting, though! There must be a heavy rain-cloud coming up; but it all seems in character with the place."

The girl ran lightly up the staircase, and commenced her ramble through the upper bed-chambers, which partook in measure of the quaintness, the antiquity and the Oriental character pervading the whole house.

"It's rather *bizarre*, this fusing of the ancient East with the mediæval West," she remarked, as she passed in turn through the different rooms, and finally came out upon the upper gallery, and gazed down into the courtyard upon which its pointed windows looked.

A very heavy rain-cloud was passing, a torrent was pouring down, and it was so black that she could scarcely see more than across the quadrangle. She stood at one of the angles of the inner square, and looked at the rain plashing

down in vertical lines, making quite a pool in the dry basin of the old fountain.

Then suddenly she started, and her heart gave a throb. What was that grey, dim, shadowy figure she saw flitting along the lower corridor? It was not Esther—Esther wore black; it was not Mrs. Burchell's portly form. She craned forward to catch sight of it as it flitted past the narrow lancet-like opening. Yes, she was certain it was the same figure she had seen before in the avenue. There was white about the head, the rest was whitish-grey; the movements were ghostly and phantom-like. She felt her head swim for a moment, and an unwonted sense of fear clutched at her heart.

"The nun! the nun!" she exclaimed, half aloud, and taking her courage in both hands, she darted to the head of the staircase, towards which the phantom figure seemed to be flitting, half expecting to meet the nun advancing to meet her.

But there was nothing. The house lay dim and deathly silent, and the white-coifed figure with the gliding step had totally disappeared. Diana made the circuit of the lower corridor, her heart thumping against her ribs, and then with a sudden and most unwonted access of nervous dread, she made a dash for Mrs. Burchell's cosy and pleasant kitchen.

As she was walking home in the watery sunshine which had followed the rain-storm, she asked lightly of Esther:

"Is Nun's Bower haunted? It's a ghostly sort of old place."

"I never heard of anything being seen there. Of course, people are fond of saying that there must be ghosts at both our houses. But they have never troubled us, and I do not think they ever will."

"She does not know anything," said Diana to herself, with a side-look at her aunt's tranquil face. "Well, I'll keep my own counsel; but I'll find out what that creature is, or I'll know the reason why!"

CHAPTER VII

THREE GIRLS AND THEIR OPINIONS

STELLA SINCLAIR was conscious of feeling depressed and worried. A certain kind of worry was not unfamiliar to her ; but, then, she could trace it to its source and understand it. Something was going a little wrong in the parish. A big lad was giving trouble, or there was illness which might perhaps spread, or the children had been naughty, or there had been a *fracas* in the school. All these little troubles, which Stella took seriously to heart, she understood and could deal with after her own fashion. She knew by experience that things would smooth themselves out in time. They kept her busy and they kept her anxious, but she was familiar with the situation, and regarded these small affairs as all in the way of business.

But now some new element had suddenly thrust itself into her life, and she did not thoroughly understand it, or know what new developments she might have to face. She was conscious of a sense that her little world was going wrong somehow, and yet she could not explain, even to herself, why or how. For once in a way she sat idle in her big "parish room," as she called it ; that big, bare place which once had been the tithe barn, and which her brother Gervase, now out in West America, had converted for her into a studio, proud of her talents, and certain that she would make a name for herself by brush and pencil.

The artist blood ran in Stella's veins. Grandfather and mother had possessed talents of no mean order. Her

grandfather's name was known in artistic circles, and was talked of yet. At school her work had excited astonishment and praise. On leaving school she had studied art regularly for two years, and had made progress which was considered most creditable and promising. Then suddenly Edna's health had failed. Stella hurried home to be with her, intending then, and for some while afterwards, to divide her time between home duties and her painting. At that time there was an artist lodging at Clee Mill, who overlooked her studies and gave her much help and instruction. But he went abroad.

Edna became a confirmed invalid so far as powers of active locomotion went. Stella became more and more occupied at home and in the parish. Gradually all else was pushed into the background, and the previous year, at the commencement of Lent, when she was pondering upon some decisive form of self-sacrifice and renunciation, she went over to her studio, turned with their faces to the wall all her paintings and studies, which had hitherto been life friends and companions to her, locked away her paints and brushes, and resolved to devote herself, all her energies, her time, and her talents, to the service of others, giving up once and for all that thing which she knew in her heart she best loved, but which, if taken up with any purpose, must of necessity involve the expenditure of time that might be more profitably employed elsewhere.

The year just gone by, when she had not so much as made a single sketch, and had only drawn pencil animals to amuse the children on wet afternoons, had not been an unhappy one. She had been very busy. She had a friend—a clergyman's daughter in the nearest large town—who was a person of great energy, and who was an excellent organiser. Stella had copied her, and had sought to organise various guilds and associations in Cleethorpe in imitation of—sometimes in connection with—those of the town. It had kept her busy and happy, and had been a source of interest and satisfaction to her, filling up all

her spare time and bringing her into touch in some way or another with almost every person in the parish—a consummation which she thought most desirable and advantageous.

But just lately things seemed going a little agog. The lads and lassies, who a year ago had joined eagerly in the proposed schemes, appeared growing tired of them now. The Bible-reading Club, when the cards for distribution for another year were to be given out, had dwindled to the most meagre proportions. There were defections in other quarters, too, and when Stella visited the mothers to ask the reason and solicit their aid, she was met by fresh discouragement.

“It isn’t a bit of use us speaking nowadays, miss; the boys and girls will go their own way. They’re not taught obedience in the schools, but play-acting and all sorts o’ nonsense as they’d be a deal better without. I tell them lessons is all play, so far as I can see. My man says when he was a lad he had work to do at home of an evening, and if he was idle or impertinent he had the stick took to him. But nobody ever has the stick now, so far as I can see. And never a bit of homework; and when their father says a word to the lads they turns on him and tells him as he doesn’t pay their schooling now, so he’s no cause to put in his word. They did get the stick that time—my sakes!—and I was glad to see ’em have it. But it’s the way the world’s wagging, miss; and it ain’t a bit of use our talking. So long as a thing’s new, and amuses them a bit, they’ll take to it. But when they’ve tried it a spell, and they don’t get nothin’ by it, as they say, why, they chucks it all up. Girls and boys, they’re all alike. One used to be able to manage one’s girls—but there, I declare, they’re getting as imperdent and sarcy as the lads!”

Stella could have cried. She was trying hard to believe that Cleethorpe was resisting the oncoming tide of the new ideas and new abuses which she heard of from other sources. It still wore an old-world look; it was somewhat remote from railroad or any large centre; but it seemed that the spirit of

the age could not be kept at bay ; and her golden dreams of a model parish had suffered a distinct shock.

But there had been other upsets, too, which she was almost ashamed to allow herself to call by that name. Up till a few weeks back she had thought that the choir-boys, at least, were her own particular property. It was she who chose them, who trained them, who gave an infinity of time and trouble to the care of their voices, their conduct, their behaviour. She loved every one of them, studied them, believed she understood them, and that they gave her back a measure of her own love, and would be loyal and staunch to her ; but what was it that had in effect happened ?

Diana had suddenly swooped down upon them in this very room as they were practising the music for Sunday. Without a "by your leave" or "with your leave," she had put herself at their head, had laughed at them for a score of little tricks of drawling or slovening, had convulsed them till the tears rolled down their faces by imitating their nasal sounds, but turning these into the notes of animals or birds ; and had then set herself might and main, with a verve and a dashing spirit that carried all before it, to teach them *how* to sing, had made them open their mouths, stretch their vocal chords, had sketched for them on the blackboard how the vocal arrangements worked, and had aroused in them an interest and enthusiasm such as Stella had never in her life attempted or achieved. Then when they were tired with the new exercises she forced upon them, she took from the wall an ancient guitar that hung there, tuned up such strings as remained to it, and held them entranced by a selection of coon and nigger songs, which she pattered off in the most charming fashion, simply convulsing her listeners, and holding them spell-bound and open-mouthed.

Three times had Diana now invaded their practices, and already a change for the better had been observed in the quality of the singing. Stella was striving hard not to feel

aggrieved and hurt, but she was conscious all the while of the little smarting wound which she would never show to the world.

It was something the same at the Mothers' Meeting too. Esther Lynne was back in her old place at its head, and Stella suddenly began to understand the power which experience of life brings with it. Nobody was less self-assertive, less prone to offer advice unsolicited than the mistress of Convent House. Stella sometimes caught herself up, blushing and hesitating, as she found herself launching forth upon a piece of serious counsel to a troubled woman, whilst Esther sat by in silence, saying nothing. But the girl was quick enough to notice that the mothers with real troubles weighing upon them would linger at the end to speak with Miss Lynne alone about them, hanging upon her words, and confident of a comprehending sympathy. Stella missed that constant reiteration of the words, "Yes, miss," "To be sure, miss," "Yes, miss, that's very true," which formed the accompaniment to her own little lectures. But the low-toned earnestness of the speakers, and the fashion in which the women themselves opened their hearts without any questions or probing, to this quiet, reticent counsellor, was a lesson in itself; and Esther had gently put the key of the riddle into Stella's hands by her words: "My dear, when you have *lived* life—not just looked on at it a few years—you will understand better. Youth has a great many privileges, but age has its compensations too. Use your youth so that you may reap a good harvest when the time for the garnering of the crops comes. Do not try and ripen and garner too fast, or the ears will be light weight and poor."

She did not fully understand even now; but she was always soothed by Esther's kindness and quick comprehension. Esther understood her, she felt, as much as anybody did. But nobody really understood—not even Rudolf!

Ah!—and here lay another cause of trouble that Stella scarcely liked to ponder, even when alone with her thoughts.

Rudolf had gone away for the first time without a special good-bye to her. She could not complain. She had as good as told him that they had better be free; but somehow she had not thought he would take her at her word.

Rudolf had always been an integral factor in her life. She had dimly and vaguely looked upon him as her ultimate fate. He would make a career for himself, but it would take him many years. He had said so himself. She meantime would watch over her father, her stepmother, the children, and the parish. She could not think of leaving them; and why should she? In the course of nature Rudolf would succeed his father at Bishop's Hall. Very likely, after a good many years, the father would be glad to have his son marry and settle down in the old house and bring a wife there. Then all would be plain sailing and delightful. Cissy would be growing up to usefulness at home; perhaps Edna might be stronger after some years; she herself would not be far away, and would still be Lady Paramount in Cleethorpe. It had all been so beautifully planned out in her own mind, till Rudolf had broken in upon her vague dreams by his startling proposition, and had forced her hand.

She could not leave home now. Duty must come before self. She was certain she had chosen right; but she had made Rudolf angry. He had not shown it, but he had not been the same since—and he had been so attracted by Diana. There lay the sting of the situation. Stella had never before seen him offering homage to another girl. She did not think it had been done to hurt her; it seemed simply inevitable. Nobody appeared able to help falling under the spell of that tall, beautiful, masterful girl, with the strong will and the insisitive individuality. When she was present others seemed to dwindle before her, to become pale, colourless, insipid. Stella felt herself a little "bread-and-butter school miss" in Diana's presence. She disliked the feeling, but was striving hard against any bitterness of jealousy. Yet this was a tougher

fight than any she remembered being engaged upon before, and she was sometimes surprised at the strength of her own emotions.

And now there burst in upon her, sudden and unannounced, this lovely April afternoon, the very person she had been thinking of—Diana Conquest herself, with the faithful and admiring Sally in attendance.

Diana was flushed and radiant, the delicate finish of her appearance not in the least disturbed by the fact that she had been playing golf all the afternoon. Sally was red and panting ; she carried all the tools, which she flung down with a mighty clatter on the floor ; she was hot, dishevelled, dirty. Diana might have come from beneath the hands of her maid, save for the delightful ruffling of her glorious hair.

“Stella, we’re just dying of thirst. You’ve got to make us some tea straight off, this very moment, and no words about it either, or you’ll feel the swing of my tee across your back ! I told Di you had spirit-kettle and everything in this den of yours, and were a hospitable soul to boot. I say, Stella, why don’t you come and join the fun sometimes ? Di is learning to play like a stunner !—and so could you, too, if you tried. Isn’t it a slashing good game when you begin to get into it, Di ? Isn’t it absurd that Stella never comes ? Always stuffing in here or poking round the parish. Horses get mud-fever running too much in mud and wet ; I’m jolly well sure humans get parish-fever, always prying and poking round, and sticking their noses into other people’s pies. Oh, I’m devoutly thankful I was not born good !”

Stella was busy over her spirit-lamp and kettle. She had heard Sally’s opinions a thousand times before, and she smiled at them indulgently ; yet to-day, almost for the first time in her life, she felt a little pricking of pain at heart, and wondered why.

Diana, meantime, was walking round the room, which she had only visited before when the boys were at practice, and

she had other matters to think of. Now she turned round one or two of Stella's pictures and looked at them, with frank amazement in her eyes.

"You don't mean to say that's your work, Stella?"

"Yes—why not?" asked the girl, turning a loving glance in the direction of her long-unseen canvas—a sunset over a stormy sea, with one white-sailed boat running before the breeze—not a very wonderful conception, perhaps, yet showing capacity and imagination and the power of conveying to canvas the sense of immensity and loneliness, as well as of the liquid, transitory beauty of the dying day.

"Well, I didn't think you had it in you—that's all!" answered Diana, examining several of the canvases in turn, and leaving them face outwards this time. "Say, you little goose, if you can do work like that, what on earth do you mean by wasting all your time and energy over what Sally calls this parish pottering?"

Diana flung herself into the one deep easy-chair the room contained, and stretched out her hand for the first cup of tea without a thought. It was as natural for her to assume the first place as it was for others to give it her. Stella, upright and bright-eyed, at the little table she had drawn out, made answer with more of spirit than she was wont to show.

"I have given up my drawing—for the present—because there are other and more important duties which I have to fulfil: We are not sent into the world just to have a good time, as Sally insists upon arguing, or to do everything that is most agreeable to ourselves. We have a Pattern set before us. Christ pleased not Himself. That should be our standard. I should like drawing far better than so much parish work; but it would be pleasing myself. You can laugh at me if you like, Sally; but that is how I feel about it; and we have to do what we believe to be right."

Diana lay back in her chair, with a face humorously sober.

"I like staying with Esther at Convent House, and cheering her up a bit, better than I should like taking to thieving as a profession, for instance. Say, Stella, ought I to leave the paths of virtue because they please me, to take to vicious ways because they don't? Because, if so, I'll begin by bagging one of those despised pictures of yours. I should very well like to lay covetous hands upon it. But I suppose, though, I mustn't steal the things I want, but only the things I loathe! Is that the way the thing pans out?"

Sally became convulsed with mirth—it took little to achieve that object—and roared aloud, declaring that that was "one in the eye for Stella." The girl, however, looked calmly at Diana, and answered with slight disdain in her voice:

"You know you are talking nonsense, Di."

"I know it perfectly, my dear; and you are talking nonsense, too, only you don't happen to know it, which is a pity; for goodness run to seed is apt to become ridiculous, if not hurtful, as you'll find one of these days when you grow older and wiser, as I suppose you will; though some kinds never do. You put that in your pipe and smoke it. Sally, leave off that idiotic giggling, and give us your philosophy of life. I'm not sure that you've got any more sense in that tousled head of yours than Stella has in hers. With her it's all work and no play; and with you all play and no work. Isn't that about the time of day?"

"Well, one can only be young once!" cried Sally, sitting up, "and I mean to have my good time whilst I'm young. Of course, I did my grind at school; and by-and-by, when I get old and stiff, I'll take to good works, or any other sort of virtuous fooling—I mean parishing—that Stella, or whoever else may be bossing the show by that time, likes to set me. Perhaps I'll have some sense in my head by then. Now I've only just sense enough to know that I should be no sort of good teaching other people the error of their ways, or the young idea to shoot, or to inculcate piety and all the other

virtues of the calendar. I'm just over twenty-one, and except when I was at school—where one learns nothing that is ever any good to one—I've lived in this rubbishy little village all my life. What on earth have I got to say to anybody about anything? I should call it jolly good cheek to try it on. I'll just take my fill of fun till I've got some sense into my noddle, and then perhaps I'll think about turning over a new leaf. But I'm blessed if the world is a bit the better for all the tomfoolery over the lower classes which is such a craze now. Hear my dad compare old ways and new—and one feels a bit sick, I must say ! ”

Diana had drunk her two cups of tea, and now sat up with eyes that shone bright with stress of feeling.

“That's just the crux of the whole matter—this rotten sentimentality is ruining everything in this blessed country. I begin to see it already. Grandmotherly legislation, whether from government on top, or in little places from local magnates, or in municipalities by boards—all the same rotten pandering to the people in some form or another. I'm not going to take up benevolence in any form. No fear ! I say that life is given us to make the most of—to climb up. And I'm going to have my climb, too, don't you make any mistake about that ! ”

“Oh, Di !—tell us !—what are you going to do ? ”

“I don't know yet. I'm having a look round. Perhaps I shall never *do* anything so mighty wonderful ; but I'm going to *be* something—in my own world if in no other ! I'll come out on top of the show, you'll see ! I'm not going to play second fiddle in my world—no fear. Ambition is the salt of life. I agree with the sentiment, Milton—isn't it ?—puts in Lucifer's mouth : Better to rule in hell than serve in heaven. You needn't look so shocked, Stella. It's a figure of speech, of course. But it embodies a good deal of sound sense. I'm not consumed with the love of my kind. I'm not fool enough to think I can set right times which are out of joint. But I

mean to have a good time in my own way ; and you bet I'll have it. Life is ours to enjoy—and that's what I'm going to do. Not by just playing games, Sally, or truck like that, but by making my mark somewhere ; and who knows but I may make a big mark one of these days ? Other women have done it before in less go-ahead times. I've got some of the qualifications. I go about with eyes and ears open. I shall find my ladder one of these days, and then up I go hand over hand. I don't stop long anywhere. I'll be on top before you've quite got your breath."

Sally believed it. She believed everything Diana said, with a whole-hearted faith that sometimes made Diana want to shake her. It was monotonous to be always adored. Stella did not adore her ; Diana was very well aware of that. She felt to-day an edge of mental opposition which almost interested her.

As she and Sally walked away together at length, she asked one of her clear, incisive questions :

"Is your brother going to marry Stella Sinclair ?"

Sally gave her a quick, inquiring look.

"Oh, it's only a sort of guess of mine ; I haven't heard a word. But I had an idea there was something between them."

"In a way there is—and has been for years. But I'm not a bit sure that it'll come to anything. Stella is developing a will of her own—that's no harm—only it happens to be rather a sort of will that may keep them apart. I'll tell you what it is, Di. I don't know what might have happened if you hadn't come here ; but it seemed pretty patent to me last month that Rudolf was going to fall in love with you ! Don't see how he could help it myself either."

Diana laughed carelessly.

"It's a way boys have," she said lightly ; but when their roads diverged, and she was alone, she said, half to herself : "A rising politician—future member—perhaps future member of Government. Well, it might be worth considering !"

CHAPTER VIII

HOMeward BOUND

THE great P. and O. steamer was churning its course steadily up Channel, and eager eyes from the deck were turned towards the coast of Old England, as it appeared in picturesque glimpses through the soft, fine-weather haze that hung over the sparkling water. The passengers, however, were but few. Most had left the ship for the land route through Europe; but Sir Humphrey Vanborough and his two companions had stuck to the vessel to the last. None of them were in any great haste to reach the end of the voyage. All had enjoyed it in varying measure, and none had any specially near or dear ones awaiting their return with impatience, and grudging every added day of journeying.

Nevertheless, Sir Humphrey's bronzed face was turned shorewards with a good deal of quiet pleasure and enjoyment. To a man who has spent long years in the torrid glare of India, the green shores and white cliffs of "home" present a picture always eagerly welcomed and fondly remembered. Times and manners might be changed—he was sure from what he heard and read and observed even in the land in which he had sojourned, that the England of to-day would differ widely from the England he had first left some thirty years ago. But though men might have changed, the old country remained the same. He sat watching the dim coast-line with contented eyes, whilst Archie played deck quoits vigorously with some of the ship's officers, and York lay back in his long chair, lost in a reverie of his own.

York had gained ground since that afternoon in February when he lay in Sir Humphrey's bungalow and listened to the plans for moving up to the hills. The ghastly pallor of his face had given place to a more healthy hue, and although he could only walk very slowly, leaning upon a stick, and though his left arm would never be very serviceable again, he refused any longer to be regarded as an invalid, though the services of his soldier-servant, who had got his discharge and was accompanying him home, would in all probability be necessary to him all his life through.

Sir Humphrey suddenly turned his eyes upon his silent companion. Although these two men had passed many months together by this time, and regarded each other with a warm affection that was entirely mutual, and of which both were keenly conscious, yet they were not specially conversant with each other's family affairs. York had gleaned, chiefly through conversation between the kinsmen, the chief events of Sir Humphrey's life, and his domestic circumstances. But being a very reserved man, he scarcely ever spoke of his own, and Sir Humphrey was not one to pry needlessly into his companion's private affairs. Thus it came about that, though they were rapidly approaching port and the separation which usually follows upon arrival at home, Sir Humphrey had only the vaguest idea what his companion intended to do with himself.

He turned and looked at him now with a kindly smile in his deep-set eyes, heavily fringed by bushy, black brows. The eyes were dark blue, steadfast in their glance, shrewd, watchful, and genial in expression. Men trusted their glance, women kindled into smiles at it, and little children were drawn as by a magnet.

"It is understood, York, that you come home with me at the first—till you have had time to look about you and make plans?"

"Is it, sir?" and York's eyes lighted with pleasure. "The

prospect is pleasant enough, but I feel as though you had had something too much of my company already."

They looked at each other for a brief while in silence, and then the elder spoke, smiling, yet with a touch of sadness in his tones :

"I have a fancy, York, that we are both lonely fellows ; and I am growing old, too, whilst you are out of the race for the present. We both seem to be bound for one of the peaceful backwaters of life. Why shouldn't we keep each other company there, at any rate, for the time being, and see what turns up for us both ? I think, from your silence on the subject, that you have no near relatives expecting you ?"

"No," answered York, slowly and a little sadly ; "I am one of the waifs and strays of the world. My parents died when I was a little chap. I went to some Scotch relations of my mother's. They were kind, but stern. Except for one girl-cousin I should have had rather a sorry childhood. Then she married—I was in despair that I was not old enough to marry her myself!—and I went to Sandhurst, and from that time lost touch of them all. I had no home after entering my profession. One by one my relations died or moved off, and I lost trace of them. India and soldiering claimed me. I have had my share of the joys of life—my days of glory—when the wine of life flows red and strong. I do not complain if I am stranded now. It must have come sooner or later. My man and I will rub along somehow, and keep each other company with our soldier-stories. And if you are good enough to let me share your quiet backwater for awhile, till I am able to turn round and get my mind adjusted to the new conditions in the old country—why, I shall be very grateful to you."

"Nay, the burden of obligation will rest with me," replied the elder man. "I am going back to an empty home. It was never empty before. I have not been able to make up my mind to visit it since my father died. It will be peopled for

me with ghosts of past days. You will serve to exorcise those ghosts, which are melancholy companions to a man who is growing old."

The speaker paused, eyed his companion with a glance of peculiar friendliness and solicitude, and then spoke out with quiet frankness.

"Will you let me put a very impertinent question upon the strength of our friendship? Your profession has become closed to you. Your career in the army is cut short. Have you private means adequate to your support? Because your country owes you something—she has had your all. I have some influence still, I think. There are berths to be picked up here and there—"

"You are very good," answered York, as the other paused for a moment. "But I have enough private means to keep me in a quiet way. I had a small patrimony, which I have increased from time to time by prize money. I have served almost all my time on foreign stations. I was always ready to exchange with men who wanted to keep at home. The pay has been good and steady; I have been able to husband my resources. If ever I am fit for work of any kind I shall be glad to avail myself of your good offer; but, if not, I have enough to live upon in modest comfort. A man can do with little, when he is a confirmed bachelor like myself."

"That is right—I am glad to know it," spoke Sir Humphrey, in accents of relief. "It always cuts me a bit to think that any man who has served his country to his own hurt and loss, should suffer want in his old age; and yet the country cannot support us all in season and out of season. So you and I and Tommy Atkins there, and young Archie if he pleases, will make our way to Nun's Bower—Bachelor's Bower, I think we shall have to call it—and have a look around us before we settle anything further. I tell you, York, I am not without my selfish reasons for desiring this. I've only got an old couple looking after the place, and from all we hear, the chiefest

trouble in life in the old country is getting domestic servants. Seems odd to us—one can scarcely understand it. So your Tommy Atkins will be a treasure to us till we get a household together. Since poor Krishnu died in that sudden fashion before we sailed, I've felt a bit lost at the thought of settling. I quite reckoned on having him to act *major domo* to the lot of us."

York's face brightened. The idea that his presence would be a source of help to Sir Humphrey, apart from the pleasure he might take in his society, was gratifying. There is something very depressing in the loneliness of arriving after a voyage without any prospect save that of looking out for some hotel or lodging in which to bestow self and belongings. York had practically no ties in England—almost wondered why he had come there at all. But the climate of India was killing him by inches, the doctors all averred, and Sir Humphrey's prompt and kindly action in the matter had taken all decision out of his hands.

But now he could regard the excitement and bustle of entering dock with amused and appreciative eyes. The sting of loneliness was removed. He, too, had a destination. He was watching the greetings, jovial and touching, which were taking place around him, when suddenly Archie Vanborough hove in sight, bringing in his wake a tall, dark, handsome compatriot, whom he presented to York in the following terms:

"I say—awfully jolly this—Hastings has come to look us up. Good fellow, Hastings, *pukka* all through. Fagged for him at Eton, you know; was by way of making a little tin god of him! He saw in the papers that we were coming home in this boat, and here he is to meet us. No beastly hotel, this show! He's got a house of his own, he says; bloated luxury, I call it, for a bachelor babe like him. And he's going to put us up for a few nights, till we have time to get some civilised togs, and so forth. Oh, yes, you're to come too, York—the little tin god decrees it. He's a bit shy and

skittish, this colt is, Hastings, but he's all right when you know him; it's only at start he tries to bolt. Just keep an eye on him till we get clear of the boat; then he'll come along quietly enough, you'll see!"

Rudolf looked at York with an amused smile in his eye.

"A bit crack-brained, our friend Archie—always was, never could be taken seriously. But I hope, Colonel York, you will give me the pleasure of your company, as Sir Humphrey has consented to do. It will be a sort of house-warming for me, since I find it rather lonely work keeping house bachelor fashion."

And as they walked along together, Rudolf told his new friend a few details concerning himself and his newly-acquired property.

Very soon, all things considered, the party found themselves enjoying Rudolf's hospitality in the pleasant little house overlooking the river, to which he was already growing attached, though he had not yet made up his mind whether he should really live there for the future, or let it furnished for a spell. He was able to give his guests an excellent dinner, having taken over cook and cellar and all from his deceased benefactor.

After dinner, as the May evening was very warm and alluring, and the lights upon the river quite beautiful in their way, the men took their chairs outside, and smoked and sipped their coffee, talking of many things the while—the war and its probable termination, the state of parties in the country, the various evils and problems of the day—all those things which occupy the minds of thinking men, and which have fresh and vivid interest for those who have hitherto only watched their growth and progress from afar.

York was feeling very tired. His bodily strength was small, and the fatigues of arrival had tried him more than he cared to confess. He spoke little, and presently dropped into a light doze. He was conscious of talk going on around him; but he had no disposition to try and take part in it. So he

let his eyes close, and nobody sought to rouse him. He looked very gaunt and white in the silvery moonbeams which fell upon his upturned face. Rudolf became aware that this Colonel York must have been at some time a remarkably attractive man. The features were good, had they not been chiselled so remorselessly by the hand of suffering and of sickness. He looked at this moment only the wreck of a man. But if Time, the healer, did his work with his accustomed skill, the day might come when the soldier would again win from bright eyes that meed of admiration which they had been wont to accord him.

The conversation gradually took a more personal turn. Sir Humphrey was asking about Cleethorpe, hearing how matters stood there, and what old faces he might expect to find when he got back. It was whilst this conversation was going on that York suddenly sat up, passed his hand across his eyes, and asked, rather in the voice of a man who dreams :

“Did somebody speak of Stella Sinclair?”

“Of Mr. Sinclair, the clergyman of Cleethorpe,” answered Sir Humphrey at once. “But surely Stella is the name of the little daughter I used to see trotting in and out of the cottages, and sitting so very still and mouse-like in the Rectory pew? How did you know that, though, York?”

They looked at him curiously. Again he passed his hand across his eyes. Then he seemed to rouse fully to the consciousness of his surroundings and company.

“I beg your pardon. I think I was half asleep. I was dreaming of my boyhood. That cousin I told you of, Vanborough—she was called Stella. She married a clergyman of the name of Sinclair ; but—”

“Why, that must be the same. The first Mrs. Sinclair’s name was Stella, I know ; for Stella was called after her. You know she died many years ago now. Mr. Sinclair has married again since.”

York’s eyes were bright with interest. Sir Humphrey smiled.

"What a curious coincidence. It must surely be the same—"

"Why, yes; but let's get an old Clergy List and make sure," spoke Rudolf, rising. "I know there is a shelf devoted to Crockford in the library here. What was Mr. Sinclair doing when your cousin married him, York?"

York remembered that perfectly; and in a few minutes it was ascertained without a doubt that Mr. Sinclair must be his cousin by marriage, and Stella the child of his early love—the girl so many years his senior could be thus described.

"So there is a little Stella now? I wonder whether she will recall her mother in any way. Can you tell me anything about her, Hastings? Do you know her well?"

"Oh, yes; I have known her from childhood; we played together, and she and my sisters grew up almost like sisters, as you may say."

"I wonder, is she as good and as beautiful as her mother was?"

"Oh, she is a very good girl," spoke Rudolf, with a very slight constraint in his voice, which, however, none of his hearers noticed, not being intimate with him. "You know she is a grown-up woman by this time. She was twenty-three last birthday."

"So much! Ah! how the time runs by. But I suppose it must be so. I know how many years my cousin has been dead. I wonder, will her daughter know my name?"

"I scarcely think she can do so, or I should have heard from Sally. Colonel York's name is known in Cleethorpe by this time; but I do not think his connection with the first Mrs. Sinclair has transpired."

"Then let me make myself known to my little cousin in my own way and at my own time," spoke York, a light still in his eyes that Sir Humphrey was glad to see in their hollow depths. "Tell me, are there more than Stella? I lost touch with the mother after her marriage. I had an idea that my heart was

broken past repair, and that it would be only pain to see her or hear from her afterwards. For a mere callow lad, I must have been a good many kinds of a fool in those days. Has Stella any brothers or sisters?"

"One brother of her own—out in the backwoods of America somewhere. There are three little kids—the children of the present Mrs. Sinclair. But Stella has adopted the whole show; she mothers them almost more than their mother does. Mrs. Sinclair is not so very much older than Stella herself—not more than six or eight years, I believe. They are by way of being great friends. Mrs. Sinclair is delicate, and Stella runs the whole household, and the parish too, on her own lines. She is quite indefatigable and invaluable—the type of the modern girl given over to good works. There are several types evolved since you left England last, Sir Humphrey, and you will find specimens of some even at Cleethorpe. Do you remember little Sally, my small sister? I daresay you would scarcely notice her; but all children adored you. You told tiger stories, and made tiger noises, and played tiger games in your shrubberies. Kids don't forget that sort of thing in a hurry. Sally will have a welcome for you, I know, though she was only a tiny when you were over last. She's another modern type—but I won't give her away—you'll soon see for yourself. I daresay they have found their way to India by this time; but perhaps they haven't come much in your way."

York fancied that when Rudolf talked of Stella it was with a distinct edge upon his voice, as though he were speaking with a personal sense—was it of grievance, or what? The soldier's senses were almost preternaturally acute through long illness. He studied the face of the young politician with keen interest. He recognised in Rudolf the masterful man of strong character and of strong will. Was it possible that there had been some collision of will already between him and his childhood's playmate? It was a train of thought not unlikely

to be aroused in the heart of the man who had in his boyhood so ardently loved Stella's mother. He knew that love could awaken in some natures at a very early period, and that it did not on that account always prove an evanescent flame.

It was certainly a curious coincidence, but it was a very welcome one, that the place to which he was going as a visitor should be the place which contained the daughter of the one woman he had ever loved. It made a link instantly between the past and the future. The loneliness was lightened. He was not quite the waif and stray he had believed himself. He would talk to Stella of her mother; she would like to listen. She would give him her confidence—perhaps her love. He might even be able to watch over her life in measure. If difficulties beset her, perhaps his hand might smooth her path, or his strength suffice to cut some Gordian knot.

He dreamed many dreams that night as he lay in bed, dreams half of waking and half of sleeping, but all centring round Stella. Something to love! Something in measure his own! Why had he never thought before this of the possibility of Stella's having left children behind her?

Ah! but during his roving life of campaigning what could he have done? It was only now that he could think of such things as home ties and sweet companionship, or friendship with young creatures of his own kith and kin. It sweetened immensely the thought of the future. When he met the other men at breakfast the next morning, his face was brighter than Sir Humphrey remembered ever to have seen it.

"I tell you what it is, York," spoke the other, with a smile, "I suspect that you and I are in a bit of a hurry to get down to Cleethorpe. Nothing like talk of old times and old faces to quicken one's desires after old places. You don't know this place, but you've got your magnet there. I have several; and if that fellow Archie wants too much time with his tailor and his hatter and his hairdresser, it strikes me that we two old

fogies will just leave him to follow, and go down at our own time."

"Well, a fellow must be just decent before he shows himself in civilised society," laughed Archie.

"Meaning that you and I are not civilised," remarked his kinsman. "Oh, go your own way, my boy. I was young once, and perhaps a bit of a dandy, too. We most of us are some time in our lives. It's better taken young than old. Well, I've got a few things I want to do; but one day will suffice for them, and if you'll keep us over to-morrow, Hastings, I shall be grateful. But after that I think we'll run down to Cleethorpe, and see what we find there. It's been very friendly and kind of you receiving us in this handsome fashion."

"The pleasure has been mine," answered Rudolf cordially; "but of course I understand your feelings. Please make your own arrangements; and if you go down before Archie is ready, I'll look after him and keep his spirits in bounds. I've been bear-leader to that cub before now, eh, Archie?"

And so it came to pass that upon the following day, in the afternoon, Sir Humphrey Vanborough and Colonel York took train for the west, and found themselves speeding through the smiling verdant country away towards Cleethorpe.

CHAPTER IX

THE WANDERER'S RETURN

THERE was a little flutter of excitement through the place when it was definitely known that Sir Humphrey Vanborough was about to return home. Cleethorpe had not concerned itself greatly about the career of its distinguished civilian ; but was just beginning to wake up to the knowledge that Sir Humphrey was a personage of distinction in some spheres, however little his ascent to this position had been heeded in his native place. Also it was said that he was bringing with him a soldier who had won fame for conspicuous gallantry in India, and people were just in the humour to make much of soldiers at this juncture. But whilst they were wondering and discussing whether they should make some demonstration of welcome for the returning travellers, the Squire intervened, and put down his foot with the resolution characteristic of the man.

“Now, I’ll have no tomfoolery here in Cleethorpe,” he said, when a deputation from the Parish Council waited upon him for his opinion and advice. “You can hang out your little rags of flags if you choose for any little returning village Tommy, who comes strutting home in his khaki, and likes that sort of thing. But I won’t have a man like Sir Humphrey Vanborough made a fool of by a vulgar little village ovation. Served his country? Of course he has served his country ! What else has he been out there all these years for save for that? It’s just because he’s served his country so well that he would hate and abhor any trumpery little demonstration ! Bless my soul ! I don’t know what he’d think had come to

us all ! He's been away best part of a quarter of a century. When he knew old England, she didn't go into sickly hysterics of admiration over every son of hers who'd played the man and done his duty. She expected it of him, and took it as a matter of course ! All this sentimental foolery and adulation would make a man like Sir Humphrey as sick as it makes me ! We were lads together. I know my man. He'll find out soon enough that the country is going to the dogs ; we needn't flourish the fact ostentatiously in his face the moment he sets foot in Cleethorpe. Demonstration—flags—arches ! Pah ! Don't let me hear another word of such tawdry trumpery ; respect Sir Humphrey's dignity, if you've got none left of your own ! ”

So the parish delegates withdrew with their tails between their legs, as they had a habit of doing when they went to consult Squire Hastings ; and the village school-master, who had been conning over the terms of a suitable address to the hero of the occasion, threw his papers into the fire with a sigh of relief, and Cleethorpe settled down to await events, without troubling its head more about the matter.

“Are you going to be there—at Nun's Bower, I mean—Esther, to give them a welcome ? ” asked Diana, who had been somewhat restless and excited since hearing that the travellers had actually landed on English soil. Life at Cleethorpe, if pleasant and surprisingly congenial to her, was becoming just a trifle monotonous to the high-spirited girl, who had been used to much variety and much amusement. On the whole, she stood the monotony remarkably well ; but she was certainly looking forward to the arrival of a new element in their life. If Nun's Bower were occupied, surely it must make a considerable difference to the lives of the inmates of Convent House ; and the sooner that consummation was achieved the better she would be pleased. “You see, you are such an old friend. He might think it a kindly thing to do ; and if you do go—please take me. I'm just dying for a little

masculine society ! Do you think Sir Humphrey will be a man one can flirt with ? It's the old ones who flirt most charmingly when they do it at all. I tell them so to their faces, and add that, like all other arts, it only reaches perfection by long practice ! ”

Esther, by this time, was used to Diana's methods of rattle-pate talk, and only smiled as she slightly shook her head.

“ No, dear, I shall not go to Nun's Bower to receive him. After all, it is his own house, and my presence there might seem a slight intrusion, though he would not take it so. Still, I would rather meet him here. I shall, however, leave a little note with Mrs. Burchell, to be given to him on his arrival asking him and his friends to dine here in the evening. This will be a relief to Mrs. Burchell, who has only got temporary village help as yet, and will be a sort of welcome to him from Convent House.”

Diana was satisfied with this compromise ; but during the next day she spent the greater part of her time at Nun's Bower, decorating the rooms with flowers, re-arranging the ornaments and draperies in her own fashion, hauling out from the chests under Mrs. Burchell's care such things as she desired for finishing touches, and producing by her handiwork such a daring scheme of colour and such gorgeous effects that Mrs. Burchell could only clasp her hands in helpless wonder and admiration, exclaiming :

“ Deary me ! just look ! It do be wonderful queer and heathenish. Maybe it'll suit the master. But I'd have bad dreams of a night if I lived in rooms like yon ! ”

More than once as Diana pursued her handiwork she was haunted by the impression of being watched. Never could she locate the unseen watcher. She would swing herself round with extreme rapidity, sometimes with an odd conviction that somebody had come in ; but never sight or sound of human presence rewarded her keenest scrutiny. The feeling was an uncanny one. She had heard of it before ; but this was her

first experience of it ; and coupled with the glimpses of a gliding white-coifed figure in or near Nun's Bower, she came definitely to the conclusion that the house was haunted.

"I suppose houses can be haunted. One can hardly set aside the mass of evidence on the subject, though rats and drains and tricks and general funk account for a whole heap of the ghosts of the world. Nobody seems to know anything about a ghost here. Perhaps it's only certain kinds of creatures who can feel 'em, and I've got the gift. Shouldn't have thought I had it in me. But one lives and learns. Perhaps, when the house is lived in again, the phantom will take itself off! Sally says she never heard of any ghost bothers anywhere in the place, and Esther says the same. Well, I'm not going to be scared by it. It won't hurt me. I've not got to sleep here, and by daylight who cares for a bit of a creep down one's spine? I think, on the whole, I'm rather proud that I can creep. I've grown up rather like the little boy of the Water Babies, who couldn't be frightened, and was pining for the experience. I've not been frightened yet ; but it would be rather entertaining some day if I were."

Esther came up with her note later on, and looked round smilingly at Diana's effects. She suggested no alterations, and as the travellers might shortly be expected, she only suffered the girl to set out the tea equipage to her liking, and pull the most comfortable and luxurious chairs into inviting positions, and then she drew her away down the long, straight avenue, Diana looking somewhat regretfully back, and saying :

"Ah, now, it seems almost unkind not to stay and give the poor helpless bachelor boys their tea. Say, Esther, how would it be for me to dress myself up in a grey nun's garb—I'm sure I could work it somehow—and wait upon them in serene and ghost-like silence, showing them how charming a real ghost-nun could be?"

"Well, dear, you ask Sir Humphrey, if he should come to-night, how he would have liked that sort of welcome. I

never heard before that a ghost was regarded as a specially cheerful or attractive companion ! ”

“ Ah ! but that surely depends upon the character of the ghost ! ” returned Diana, laughing. “ I must really try my hand some day at giving Sir Humphrey a pleasant little surprise ! ”

“ Well, dear, I think Sir Humphrey’s nerves will be equal to the occasion,” returned Esther quietly ; “ but remember, Di, that harm has sometimes been done by ghost-playing which was only intended for fun. Don’t run any risks of really scaring anyone from a love of mischievous amusement.”

Diana promised laughingly. She was in extra high spirits that day. She was coming to the conclusion that perhaps (for a time, at least) it was more entertaining to interest yourself really and heartily in a few people, than to mix in a shifting throng, where new faces appeared and disappeared in a never-ending stream, and there was not time to get up interest in one promising or piquant situation before it was pushed aside for another.

“ I’ve made ten thousand acquaintances these last years,” said the girl to herself, as she prepared to dress for dinner, “ but there has never been time to make friends. I’m going to try my hand at that sport next. I’m going to make tremendous friends with Sir Humphrey, and perhaps with Colonel York, too. But Sir Humphrey comes first. I suppose he and Esther will end by making a match of it, and I shall aid and abet. If my little mother was the innocent means of keeping them apart all these years, there’s a fitness of things in her daughter being the one to bring them together at the last. I’m going to pay the rôle of a little special providence to them. Good old providence often wants some assistance here below, I take it ; and I’ve no objection to put my shoulder to the wheel of the god in the car. It will be like a novel of Jane Austen’s, or a page out of Cranford, watching the little comedy. It’ll be awfully funny, but I’m going to enjoy every bit of it.”

A little note had come down from Nun's Bower not half an hour ago, gratefully accepting Esther's invitation. Sir Humphrey and the Colonel were coming. The young kinsman had not yet arrived.

"He will be useful later," remarked Diana, when she heard. "A boy comes in very handily in a place like this; but it's just as well there should not be too many in the field at first. Archie will do excellently for me to flirt with later, whilst the other pair do their own billing and cooing." These last phrases, however, were not spoken aloud. Somehow, with all the freedom of tongue she permitted herself, and Esther smiled at, Diana had never ventured to tease her about Sir Humphrey. She was sometimes surprised at her own reticence in this respect. It gave her an unconscious respect for her aunt, which was a salutary experience to one of her temperament.

Diana looked rather magnificent as she swept downstairs with her toilet complete. National mourning was ended, and the girl had robed herself in a cream and amber brocade, cut low enough to show the beautiful contours of her neck and throat, which rose from a soft mass of creamy filmy lace and chiffon. Her arms also were bare—white and round and beautifully shaped. Her only ornament was a collar of pearls round her throat, and a pair of heavy antique gold bracelets, which she often wore, dubbing them her "handcuffs." White and yellow roses were arranged in a graceful spray amidst the soft laces of her bodice, and her shimmering train lay a glimmering mass of drapery far behind her as she moved. Her white skin and the wealth of her golden hair all toned in and harmonised with the rich golden lights and bronze shadows of her dress. She was radiant and bewitching—and she very well knew it.

"My dear, you are so grand!" exclaimed Esther, between remonstrance and admiration, at sight of the apparition.

Esther, of course, wore her mourning for her father. Diana

had only prevailed upon her to lighten it by some softening touches of white crape and chiffon. She had insisted upon doing Esther's hair in her own skilful and graceful fashion, and now, with a little flush in her cheeks, a soft light in her liquid brown eyes, and the pure white roses at her throat, Esther Lynne's gentle and gracious charm was by no means eclipsed by the more daring and dashing beauty of the girl at her side. Diana led her to a mirror, and stood looking over her head, as she said :

"It reminds me of the old picture that used to hang up at home—I don't know where it came from. It was called 'Modesty and Vanity'; and I used to sit gazing at it for hours, wondering which was which. Modesty had so much more to be vain of than vanity!"

"You are a sad flatterer, Di," spoke Esther, moving away; "but you shall wear your pretty frocks when you wish, and I will not scold. We can only be young once."

"Some people can be young always," answered Diana, with a sudden note of gravity in her voice; "but they have to learn the secret first, and that's a large order!"

A few minutes later, and the visitors were being ushered into the room; two tall, bronzed men—one of them somewhat haggard and with a halt in his gait, which rendered him dependent upon his stick even in the house—men with that indescribable air of distinction which defies analysis, yet makes itself felt as a power from the first moment of introduction, and causes mere flesh-and-blood physical beauty to take quite a secondary place.

If Diana had expected anything very dramatic or telling in this meeting, she was destined to disappointment. Sir Humphrey Vanborough was a man of the world, who had been through the mill of life, and Esther had learned self-mastery in a school of which the brilliant girl beside her knew nothing. A vivid smile, the firm, close grip of a lean brown hand, a few genial, cordial, grateful words—and the

thing was over. Sir Humphrey was presenting his friend to their hostess, and then his glance moved and fixed itself upon Diana.

"We ought not be strangers, my dear," he said, before Esther had finished settling Colonel York in an easy-chair. "Your mother and I used to play together as children. Do you know how like her you are? I was pleased to hear from young Hastings the other day that Arabella's daughter had come to live at Convent House. I am glad that you are not left alone, Esther—I mean, Miss Lynne."

He turned to her now with another of those smiles that always evoked an answering glow in the eyes which met it, and she replied gently :

"Must it be so, Sir Humphrey? Or are we not old enough to be comrades still?"

"With all my heart," he answered, as he held out his hand once more and gripped hers close. "I begin to feel I am at home again. There is one person who has not changed—Esther Lynne."

"Not changed—only grown old," she answered gently.

At that moment dinner was announced, and Sir Humphrey gave his arm to their hostess, whilst Diana accommodated her free steps to the slow movements of the Colonel, chatting so gaily to him the while that the slowness of the transit was quite covered.

"She is a dear girl," spoke Esther softly to her companion, as they sauntered after them. "It has brought the sunshine back to Convent House. She is like her mother, but with a great deal of her father's strength of will and vehemence of purpose. She has had a curious upbringing. It would have spoilt many natures, but it has not spoilt hers. I think she will make a fine woman, and a good one."

At dinner-time talk was general, and Diana certainly led it. She was in her gayest mood. She felt that both these silent men regarded her with favour and admiration. She was in

her element, as she called it, in masculine society. Her daring and racy speeches entertained her listeners. She had travelled and observed enough to be interesting in her own talk, and to ask intelligent and pertinent questions of others. She pleaded guilty to the accusation brought against her of having decorated Nun's Bower for the arrival of its master, and received the thanks of the latter with her customary vivacity.

"I hoped you would think it Mrs. Burchell's taste! Poor old thing, how she did stare! I begged her to let me array her for this occasion in flowing Oriental robes and a turban. You should have seen the good soul's face! But really, she would have looked a very imposing figure!"

In the drawing-room afterwards, conversation still flowed freely and gaily. The windows stood open to the soft, warm air; lingering daylight was mingling with the silver radiance from the full moon. Sir Humphrey and Esther were lost in earnest talk about old days. Their faces were very happy and very content.

Diana and the soldier passed a pleasant time together over reminiscences of people and places both had known—for both had travelled; till the girl, detecting signs of weariness upon her companion's face, moved across the room and stood beside the piano.

"Sing to us, dear," said Esther. "Humphrey, you remember Arabella's voice? Diana has it again—only more so. She will sing to us, I know. It will be like old times to hear her," and she smiled as the girl took her seat at the instrument.

Diana gave one look around her, struck a few chords, and began to sing. There was a gay trilling lilt in the joyous young voice, so round, so full, so true, that held the listeners spell-bound:

" ' When all the world is young, lad,
And all the trees are green,

The Niece of Esther Lynne

And every goose a swan, lad,
 And every lass a queen ;
 Then hey for boot and horse, lad,
 And round the world away ;
 Young blood must have its course, lad,
 And every dog his day.' ”

The strong fingers upon the keys improvised a few telling and triumphant chords. Then in a fashion which showed the performer to be no mean musician, the character of the music changed. She was improvising now, and a strange tender melancholy seemed to float around them, piercing and insistent. Then she began to sing once more. Was it a touch of true dramatic art, or was it some capacity for sympathy—some comprehension of the underlying pathos of life, which brought that thrilling, haunting cadence into her wonderful voice?—

“ ‘ When all the world is old, lad,
 And all the trees are brown ;
 And all the sport is stale, lad,
 And all the wheels run down ;
 Creep home, and take your place there,
 The spent and maimed among ;
 God grant you find one face there,
 You loved when all was young.’ ”

There was a deep hush through the room. Diana would not look round. She had a feeling that Sir Humphrey had risen, and that his hand was resting upon the back of Esther's chair. She knew without any telling that one pair of soft brown eyes was full of tears. Her fingers continued to stray softly over the keys. She was smiling to herself. Were they really half in love still, these two who had certainly been almost lovers once? She was interested in the situation. It had an old-world flavour about it which appealed to one side of her nature. One self was touched by it ; the other found it just a shade comic ! Love at that age !—it seemed even a trifle incongruous. But it was rather pretty to watch the

little flutter in Esther's quiet self-possession, and there was something distinctly fascinating and captivating in Sir Humphrey's old-time courtesy and chivalry. Oh, yes, she very well liked watching it all. It made quite a little mild excitement in life. And if she could aid and abet the consummation by any small artifices of her own—so much the better.

A hand was laid upon her shoulder. Sir Humphrey's voice spoke over her head. There was a little thrill in his tones, of which she was distinctly conscious.

"Child, where did you learn to sing like that?"

She turned herself round upon her stool, and looked up at him, with arch laughter in her eyes.

"I was taught by my master—he was one of the old school, you must know—never to think about myself when I was singing, but to throw myself into the spirit of my song, and learn how to sing by watching the drama of life as it would unfold itself before me. Have I learned my lesson well, Sir Knight?" and she rose as she spoke, and swept him a magnificent curtsy, after which she crossed over to Esther, laid a caressing hand for a moment upon her hair, and said:

"It is such a lovely moonlight night—I am going for one little prowl round the cloister. You can have a chat together till I come back. I shan't be long."

She gave one quick glance at Colonel York, as much as to invite him to accompany her, but, truth to tell, the soldier was too tired to move, though he feared his presence might be somewhat *de trop*. So Diana passed out of the window alone, shrugging her shapely shoulders with a whimsical gesture, as she said to herself:

"I fear our wounded hero is just a trifle dense!"

CHAPTER X

OLD FRIENDS AND NEW

DIANA was walking between the Squire and Sir Humphrey Vanborough. It was Sunday afternoon, and the Squire had walked over to renew acquaintance with his old friend, who had arrived the previous day, and who had appeared at church in the old Vanborough pew that morning ; but had been so besieged by the humbler sort of folk at the close of the service, that his quondam companion had contented himself with just a handshake, and the promise to "look him up" later in the day.

It had been a great delight to Sir Humphrey to find himself remembered by so many of the old folks. The rising generation, and even the middle-aged men were strangers to him ; but the old people he knew by name, and they could exchange reminiscences with him, which showed how well his boyhood was remembered both by himself and others. There were many gaps, to be sure, amongst the once-familiar faces ; but some of these gaps were accounted for by infirmity or illness ; and Sir Humphrey had already made many promises of paying visits to cottages round the neighbourhood, where there were old men and women who remembered him yet, and would be "main glad" for a sight of him again.

"The Squire did you out of your 'reception,'" spoke Diana, with laughing eyes ; "but you've had a better one to-day. Flummery and tall talk is all very well in its way ; but it's a bit too cheap in these days. I'm not so hopelessly modern myself but what I can appreciate the difference !"

Then the Squire laughed, and told his old friend of the deputation that had waited on him, and how he had sent it away with a flea in its ear. Sir Humphrey laughed, too, in his genial way.

"I will let them know that I heard of their kind intentions, and appreciate their goodwill. But I'm glad you stopped any demonstration, Hastings. You were quite right. Ovations are suitable for national heroes, when the heart of the nation is stirred, and people feel they must show them recognition. But one does not like too much of it. It cheapens the dignity of service. It goes against the grain of the English nature—unless that nature has changed since I was over here last, which I am loath to believe."

"It's like this," spoke the Squire, with energy. "The nation is still sound at the core—sound when it is really stirred. Look how it rose to the occasion in that dark time we went through eighteen months ago! Look how our fellows are behaving in South Africa now! One is proud of them—yes, proud of them, sir, and the way they uphold the honour and humanity and dignity of the old country! I tell you I have heard things of them which have brought tears to my old eyes. My wife has a friend out there among the nurses. The other day she told us that when the lads in hospital got wind of all the lies the foreign press circulated about the atrocities and brutalities of the British soldier, the only thing about it which troubled them was lest the Queen (God rest her!) should believe it. 'For it 'ud break her heart,' they said, 'if she thought her boys could behave like that. And it 'ud fair break ours that she should think it of us!' That was all they thought of. Quite indifferent to what a scurrilous press might say, if only the Mother-Queen knew it to be false. I tell you, Vanborough, it's things like that which warm my old heart, and bring me comfort yet. For when one looks about us at what goes on beneath our eyes, I tell you, one's soul too often sickens within one!"

"Ah, I am sorry, I am sorry," answered Sir Humphrey; "I have feared it in measure. One sees the change creeping all over the world; but I am loath to believe it is all retrogression. In an age of philanthropy—"

The word acted something as a red rag on a bull. The Squire brought his stick sharply down upon the ground.

"I tell you, Vanborough, it's this philanthropy and tomfoolery that is the ruin of the country. It's been at the bottom of the so-called education, which has had thirty years in which to thrive and batten, and has at the end pretty well ruined the industrial classes, and quite ruined the servant class and the agricultural labourer. Our old idea—when we didn't prate of philanthropy—was to fit men and women to do their duty in that state of life to which it had pleased God to call them. Now the aim and object seems to be to unfit them for that and to fit them for no other. Go where you will, ask any master man you like—carpenter, blacksmith, carriage-builder, shopkeeper even, and they will all tell you the same tale. Where to turn for men who will take the trouble to learn their trade and give good work for good money they do not know! The self-respecting workman who takes pride in his work is becoming as extinct as the dodo. It's just one game of scamp and scuttle—a full day's wage for eight hours of lounging and chattering, with the minimum of work accomplished that the patience or the purse of the master can stand. It makes one's heart ache and one's blood boil to watch the example the men of the present day are setting to the rising generation; and the rising generation are copying them only too closely!"

The Squire was mounted on his hobby-horse now, and Sir Humphrey looked into Diana's eyes and returned her smile. It brought old times back to hear the deep voice booming away. Old Squire Hastings used to grow heated over the abuses of his times, and his son was not behind him either in choler or in power of expression.

"I tell you, Vanborough it makes me fair sick sometimes to see how the boys begin to go on! Do you remember when we were lads together, and wanted our games—cricket, football, what not? We used to tramp off with our bats over our shoulders, and walk miles if need be to practice or match. But these delicate young jackanapes in the village, oh, bless you! they can't walk! They must have a brake and pair of horses to take them to their matches. And you'll see these brakes standing outside every public-house along the road, whilst the young louts are drinking and playing cards inside!"

"Is that really so?" asked Sir Humphrey, taken aback.

"It is round here; I hope to goodness it is not everywhere the same; but why should Cleethorpe be worse than other places? I tell you, Vanborough, I've seen such play when these matches have been on, as would have disgraced little lads of ten and twelve in our times. Sometimes quite an appreciable number of the men are slightly the worse for drink. At football it is worse. I tell you, that last Good Friday—of all days in the year—a football match was arranged, unknown to me, and in a field not far from the church, of all places. We were disturbed by the noise at the three-hour service, and when I went out afterwards to see what was going on, I declare that, so far as I could tell, more than half the persons assembled were the worse for liquor! Well, I brought that match to an end in double quick time, I tell you!"

"I should hope so," said Sir Humphrey gravely. "I am very sorry to hear all this. One likes to be proud of the lads, and encourage them in their sports. In old days we used all to play together on the big green on the top of Clee Rise—"

"Oh, yes, I know, I know. But would you believe it, Vanborough, I had a deputation not long since from this blessed Parish Council, to tell me that they wanted a village recreation-ground nearer at hand, if you please. The boys found it too far to walk three-quarters of a mile to their playground! They wanted one at their very doors, and what

did I think of giving up the meadow by Clee Mill for the purpose? They had come to consult me about the scheme, and ask my opinion. Well, I gave them my opinion straight! They have not been in any mighty hurry to hear it again!"

Diana's eyes were brimming with laughter.

"Isn't he delightful?" she asked, *sotto voce*. "I do wish I could be there to hear when these scenes take place."

"But surely there must be some of the old sort left," pleaded Sir Humphrey, divided between amusement at the Squire's vehemence and regret at the state of things disclosed by these revelations.

"Why, yes, to be sure there are," spoke the Squire, his brow clearing a little; "we have a certain number of the old yeoman farmers left, thank goodness, and the sturdy, staunch fellows who feel as much disgusted as I do with this rotten, effeminate nonsense. But the worst of it is that it's the men from the lower stratum, pushing up, who lead the van nowadays. They push themselves upon these detestable little local boards and councils. And then they pander to the people for their votes, always planning some new tomfoolery to keep the riff-raff in good humour. It's in the municipalities that you see the full glory and beauty of our present-day organisation and local government. But it's quite bad enough here, I can tell you."

They were walking all over familiar ground now. Diana had volunteered to show Sir Humphrey round the garden, and take him to meet the Squire, who had promised to walk over from the Hall. This they had accomplished, but the old friends would not let Diana go, as she suggested. Her bright companionship was pleasant to them both, and she walked between them, amused by their flood of reminiscences, and especially by the Squire's diatribes against new-fangled men and manners.

She was a notable figure in her long, straight white dress and wide black hat. She looked almost as tall as her

companions, though both men were just over six foot. She wanted to make Sir Humphrey tell her about himself, but somehow it always ended in his telling about somebody else ; and when he and the Squire got upon old days and old times, she was fain to listen in silence, for she found it more interesting than she could have guessed.

"He is awfully fascinating, though I can't tell why," she said to herself more than once. "I can't think how it was Esther let him slip through her fingers as she did. Duty!—well, I should say a man like that took rank before the kind of fretful old valetudinarian my grandfather by all accounts must have been. After the first wrench, a well-trained manservant would have done every bit as well for him. Oh, these good people with their enthusiasm for self-sacrifice, what a hash they do make of their own and other's lives ! Well, thank goodness, I'm not made like that. I mean to have my good time in my own way, and Sir Humphrey Vanborough may be quite a factor in the game."

For Diana felt distinct pleasure in the very evident admiration she had awakened in her new friend's mind, and responded to his fatherly and chivalrous overtures with a pretty arch playfulness and eagerness that made a link between them at once.

Meantime, whilst friendships between old friends and new were being prosecuted out of doors, Esther Lynne was growing to know something more of the silent soldier, who had accompanied Sir Humphrey down the long yew walk early in the afternoon, and had been persuaded by the mistress of Convent House to rest awhile in the cool cloistered walk before retracing his steps home again.

Since Diana's advent, the cloister had become somewhat transformed ; basket chairs and lounges, with abundance of striped blankets and soft cushions, invited, as it were, to leisurely idleness under that pleasant shelter. Persian rugs made patches of warm colour upon the stone tiling, and

little light tables, with books, work, or at certain hours of the day the tea equipage, stood handily about, showing that this covered cloister, part in sun and part in shade, was a regular place of resort with the ladies of the house.

York had found it very pleasant sitting there in the shade with Esther Lynne for his companion. They had had a good deal of talk already, and Esther's face was bright with interest as she turned it full upon him.

"I am so glad about it—so glad that little Stella will have a friend and kinsman and adviser rather specially her own. With her temperament, I almost think that somebody coming fresh into her life may be able to help her more than we can do. You know what I mean? We have known Stella since she was a tiny mite. Perhaps she thinks we do not always take her quite seriously enough. She has grown up too much in one groove; but naturally she would not think that I had any call to say that. It would be the pot calling the kettle black!"

"You think Stella wants help, Miss Lynne? Tell me, in what way could I possibly serve her—a helpless, broken-down fellow like myself?"

Esther eyed him earnestly, studying his worn face with her serenely gentle gaze. A smile hovered about her lips.

"Perhaps your very helplessness may be your greatest help," she said softly. "You have had experience of that very thing which so appeals to Stella—you have sacrificed your all at the altar of duty—just as she longs herself to do."

The soldier looked earnestly at her, as though he would ask more. Her meaning was not yet clear to him.

"She is such a dear, good little girl," spoke Esther tenderly. "She means so well; she has such almost stern ideals of right and wrong. Not for a moment would one wish to lower these—to seek to make her palter with her own conscience. But yet, like all the rest of us, she makes mistakes. Her mistake is that she confuses the means with the end."

"I do not think I quite follow you."

"You will understand better when you get to know Stella. Her admiration goes out in an immensely earnest way towards those persons in the world's history—from our Lord downwards—who have sacrificed their all—laid down their lives, perhaps—given up all they held most dear, to do some great work to which they felt a call. By just a little not unnatural twist she has come to confuse, as I say, the means with the end. She thinks that it is the best and highest thing she can do to sacrifice such things in her own life as seem to her most attractive, without always considering whether this sacrifice is any real step towards the goal she is seeking to reach. You will understand better as you come to know her. The trouble is that young people have so often laughed at and teased her about her devotion to duty, that she has grown sensitive about it, and will very quickly draw into her shell when the subject is brought up. Naturally, you understand, the little grain of obstinacy which we all of us have in our composition has been aroused in her in defence of her theories. She does not very readily talk about them now—in the sense of discussing them ; but she hugs them all the harder for that, and I think is sometimes in danger of making mistakes which she may feel sorrowfully when it is too late."

The soldier sat looking straight before him. In his deep-set, hollow eyes the spark of the old fire smouldered still. Give him something to fight for, something to attain, and he was his own man again ! It was the sense of uselessness and superfluity which had been his haunting trouble all along, since he had faced the prospect of a crippled life. Let him find something to do, someone whom he might help, and he asked nothing more.

"I am very grateful to you for what you have told me, Miss Lynne," he said, after a long pause. "Stella's mother was dearer to me than any other human being in the world ; for my parents I scarcely remember. Her gentleness and kindness

made the sunshine of my childhood. If I can in turn do anything for her daughter, however small the service may be, it will make a happy man of me."

It was not long after this that the pedestrians returned, bringing the Squire back with them. Diana had been certain that Colonel York would still be at Convent House, and had vowed that they must both come back to tea.

"Nobody's tea is quite like Esther's, is it now, Squire? I should think even you remembered that, Sir Humphrey! I never cottoned much to tea till I got to Convent House. It's a liberal education to see how Esther manages the tea-table. There's an old-world grace and charm about her then which I watch with unfailing delight every day. I suppose I ought to take the task off her hands, but I'm not going to. It's the rising generation that expects to be waited on now, you'll find. The aunts and mothers do everything, and the daughters and nieces look on and admire."

"You remind me of the tale I heard about the elderly gentleman who had never tasted the wing of a chicken. 'When I was young,' he explained, 'the elders had the wings and we youngsters the legs; but now the young ones have the wings and we old ones the legs; so, as it happens, I've never tasted the wing.'"

"That's about it," laughed Diana gaily; "that's the way the world wags now. I wonder whether there will be any turn of the tide. A little chap of five—spoiled to the top of his bent, but a charming little fellow all the same—told me the other day that he was going to bring up his children with the greatest severity. And he meant it, too, you bet, the little beggar!"

And then they reached the old-world garden and its quaint cloistered enclosure, where already Esther's white hands were moving amongst the tea-cups, and the silver kettle was hissing and spluttering, watched over by the soldier, who looked brighter than Diana had seen him as yet.

"We've had the most improving time!" cried the girl, as she flung herself down with her rapid, graceful abandonment into the easiest of the padded chairs. "My sakes (as the dear old darkies used to say), won't some folks' ears be burning still in and about Cleethorpe! The Squire's just been letting fly all round, Esther, and I've had a real good time. Squire, you really ought to have waited for me! You're so awfully fetching—the boys are out of it with you! We'd have had a lively time of it, you and I together, I guess. For I can ramp and rage about some! I declare we'd make most places hum a bit if we started fair together!"

When Diana spoke her most daring slang, she invariably assumed the soft, gentle drawl of the Virginian, which gave a piquancy to her speech quite impossible adequately to convey. She would also put on a most inimitable drollery and innocence of expression, which contrasted so humorously with her words as to convulse her hearers with mirth. She had no diffidence about making herself the centre of observation, or assuming the leading *rôle*. As she took her cup from the Squire's hand, she looked up archly at him from beneath the golden fringe of her brows.

"Young men have their points, of course; but they've so many things to learn that they make one tired. I find it an improving thing to ask them a riddle: 'Which would you prefer, to be a greater fool than you look, or to look a greater fool than you are?' It don't matter which they choose; you just look them up and down, and you say, 'I guess that's impossible, though.' You generally find that settles him for a spell. If it doesn't—well, then, he's got some spunk in him; and I can stand a man with spunk, even if he is a bit of a fool!"

"My dear Di!" spoke Esther gently, fearing lest Sir Humphrey might be overwhelmed by this modern specimen of girlhood.

"No, don't begin to apologise for me, Esther. I'm made

so, and I can't help it. Don't be like the Manchester millionaire's daughter who so sweetly besought, 'You must excuse my mother, she's rather vulgar!'"

So Diana rattled away, and they sat and looked at her, and laughed. Very charming she looked, too—all white and gold—even to the yellow gleams in her bright eyes, which pleasurable excitement—not anger this time—had brought there.

She was in her element, and Esther enjoyed her little triumph perhaps more than the girl enjoyed it herself. It was so good to have young life about her again. All sense of haunting sadness was banished in the presence of this gay young creature. Sir Humphrey's kindly face beamed upon her, and now and again he turned his glance upon Esther with sympathetic amusement. When the guests left, and Esther had gone back to the house, Diana still lay back in her chair, with her arms crossed behind her head.

"I don't want to cut old Esther out," she was thinking to herself in a sort of mischievous, idle reverie, "but certainly Sir Humphrey Vanborough is a very attractive man!"

CHAPTER XI

STELLA'S KINSMAN

"DID you come into my room last night?" asked Sir Humphrey, as the two men sat at breakfast together.

"I? No. I never left my bed. I was much too comfortable, I assure you."

"I thought it couldn't be you. I suppose it was a gust of wind. I was half awake and half asleep some time in the night, and the window was open, and the moonlight was bright enough to show up the outlines of everything pretty clearly. I saw the door move and begin to open slowly, and I called out to know if anything was wrong. I wasn't quite awake, but had a notion you might be wanting something, or had sent your man to me. Then the door went to again just as softly as it had opened. By that time I was quite awake, and jumped up and looked out; but there was nothing to be seen, and I know you'd have answered when I spoke—"

"And not got away so fast," smiled York. "No, I do not think I am addicted to nocturnal ramblings, either awake or asleep. I should think, as you say, it must have been a puff of wind."

"Most probably. Perhaps the catch of the door works oddly. I can turn the key another night," and with that the subject dropped, and was speedily forgotten.

Sir Humphrey meant to make a tour of the place this morning, and look up sundry old friends amongst the rustic population, with whom he had a common past to discuss. He was surprised how clearly and insistently his own boyhood

The Niece of Esther Lynne

was coming back to him, now that he found himself in his old-time home. On his brief visits to his father he had not felt this nearly so strongly. His mind had been more or less engrossed still with the problems which beset him in the far-off land where he was building up a reputation such as it is only given to a few to attain. Then he had been a mere bird of passage. Now he had "come home."

He had not troubled his head as yet as to whether he intended permanently to reside at Nun's Bower, or whether he would have a house in town, or at least chambers or a flat, and keep more in touch with the world of politics and of action, which had been his sphere for so long. But of one thing he was certain. He would always retain his footing in Cleethorpe. He would never sell or let his own quaint little place there. Whether he resided there much or little, he would retain his rights upon it, and make it his home whenever it pleased him to do so. He had no present intention, however, of setting up a regular establishment. With York's well-trained soldier-servant to act as butler, and the help Mrs. Burchell had got in from the village, he intended for the present to rub along. He rather liked the feeling of "camping out," as he called it, after the formality he had been used to in India. He would have to see shortly what must be done in the matter of horse-flesh, and perhaps a groom would have to be engaged before long. But he was not in any immediate hurry even on that score. If walking were rather a novel experience to the "three-tailed bashaw," as Archie irreverently dubbed his kinsman, it was not a disagreeable one.

The weather was delicious, the sun shone brilliantly, tempered by the cool breezes of the scent-laden spring-tide. The intense verdure of the fields, the glories of the woodlands, bursting into leaf, the wealth of flowers in garden and hedge-row, and the ecstatic carolling of the birds, all served to make this home-coming a season of gladness and content; and there was so much to see and observe every time he stirred

outside, that Sir Humphrey was well content to go afoot, and take it all in, bit by bit, with loving eyes and a grateful heart.

"I am going to look up the Sinclairs to-day," said York. "Do you think I may presume so far upon my connection to make a morning call? I want to see little Stella, and I could not get to church yesterday morning."

"No; and I'm not sure that you're up to the walk to-day, either. It's only half a mile by the field path, but—"

"Oh, I can do that all right enough to-day. It was the shaking in the train that jacked me up a bit. These two quiet nights have set me up again. I'll take my time; I want to look about me as I go. You don't think they'll regard it as an intrusion?"

For York was a man of singularly retiring nature, and found it difficult to realise that his visit could be regarded in the light of a compliment or distinction.

"Not a bit of it, I'll answer for that. Yes, I would certainly go. Monday is always a parson's holiday, if he ever gets one; and they'll be extremely glad, I am sure, to claim kinship with you. They do not know anything about it yet, so it will come as an agreeable surprise."

That morning walk was a pleasant experience for the soldier. Sir Humphrey accompanied him part of the way to put him in the right road. But soon he became aware that York was trying to accelerate his slow pace on his account, so he nodded him farewell, and swung off in another direction, leaving the other to his own leisurely progress, which, after several halts and rests to look about him and enjoy the clear, sweet freshness of the May morning, brought him to the Rectory gate, just as Mr. Sinclair was sallying forth. It took but a very short time to establish cordial relations between the gentle, dreamy clergyman and the soldier, whose name he knew well.

"Yet I never connected the names," he avowed. "Of course, I remember how Stella used to tell me of Donald

York, her cousin and playmate. But when I heard of Colonel York's return with Sir Humphrey, I never put two and two together. My wife will be so interested in your story. Will you let me take you to her, as I have a sick parishioner to visit? And there is Stella, too. Edna will know where she is to be found. My little right hand, my curate, as I call her sometimes. She is like her mother in very many ways, though with an individuality all her own, too. Sometimes I think she is disposed almost to overdo herself, dear child; her energy and unselfishness are boundless. But I must not praise my own daughter too much. You shall judge for yourself when you know her."

York was led into the pleasant drawing-room, where, in the bay window, Mrs. Sinclair's couch stood, and she was giving the three children a little simple lesson.

At sight of the visitor all the three held back for a moment, and then the youngest boy strode boldly forward, staring up at the intruder, and asking:

"Is you Sir Tiger?"

York looked down, his eyes brimming with amusement at the sturdy little chap, whose twin-sister now made a rush towards him, shouting at the top of her baby voice:

"Sir Tiger—Sir Tiger—tell us tiger stories!"

"Hush, hush, children," spoke the mother, half rising from her couch, and holding out her hand. "Pray excuse my spoilt babies, Colonel York," she said. "They have been so excited about Sir Humphrey's return. Sally Hastings has told them of the tiger stories he used to tell her when she was little, and they will persist in calling Sir Humphrey Sir Tiger!"

York, it seemed, was no mean hand in the telling of tiger stories. Whilst Mr. Sinclair explained in a low voice to the mother what Colonel York's connection had been with his first wife's family, the children, clustered round the soldier, were listening, wide-eyed and breathless, to a series of briefly

entrancing narratives ; and when at last dismissed by their mother, they went off shouting lustily :

"You're Sir Tiger—you're Sir Tiger ; and Sir Humphrey can just be himself !"

The ice was now happily broken, and Edna's gentle sweetness and ease of manner smoothed the way for a pleasant sense of easily established friendship. She was glad to hear about Stella's mother, whose memory the girl cherished very tenderly.

"She is the dearest daughter-sister to me. I scarcely know which to call it. I was a grown-up parlour-boarder at the school Stella attended for a few years. We loved each other from the first. But you know it is not every girl who would have continued to give her love to the woman her father had married. I was almost afraid myself what might be the end of it. But Stella's sweetness and goodness have never changed or wavered. She is the dearest of companions still, and is like a second mother to the babies. I don't know what I should do without her—or her father either. How interested she will be to hear about you ! I wonder whether she is at home. She spends much of her time in a big room of her own that was once a barn, and was fitted up by Gervase for her. If you will let me, I will ring the bell and send. I would like her to see you before you go."

"May I go and see her myself in this place ?" asked York, who felt as though he would like to introduce himself to Stella's daughter (as she was still to him) in his own way. "I must not tire you too long, Mrs. Sinclair ; but I should like to see Stella before I go."

Edna was not lacking in tact or sympathy.

"Ah, yes, perhaps that will be best. Go, by all means. If you step out of that window, and follow the winding path there round to the back of the house, you will see the big room behind a great clump of laurels. There used to be a sort of farmyard behind ; but it has been turned into shrubbery and

wilderness garden. If Stella is not there, she must be out ; but I believe she intended to make up the Sunday-school registers for the month this morning. She often does that on Mondays."

So York took his way as directed, and quickly saw that he was to be rewarded ; for almost as soon as he sighted the big building, with its door standing wide open to the spring sunshine, a girlish figure in soft grey garb presented itself suddenly in the doorway, and a pair of questioning hazel eyes were raised to his, with an expression which suddenly caused one word to spring from his lips.

"Stella !"

A startled glance came into the soft eyes. And the soldier advanced with a kindly smile.

"My dear," he said softly, "do you know how like you are to your mother ?"

Her face kindled instantly.

"Did you know my mother ?" she questioned breathlessly, and then a gleam of recognition lighted her face ; she held out her hands, exclaiming, "You are Uncle Don !"

He took her hands and drew her up to him, stooping to imprint a kiss upon her forehead.

"Did she teach you to call me that ?"

"I think I taught myself," answered Stella, aglow with eagerness and pleasure. "There was a photograph of a boy—a very young soldier in uniform. I used to like to look at it. Mother called it Cousin Donald ; but I used to call it Uncle Don."

"That is the better name, little Stella. Let me go on being Uncle Don. Your mother was the only sister I ever had. I should like her daughter to call me uncle."

Then she led him into her big room, and made him comfortable in the easy wicker chair beside the open window, where the banksia rose peeped in and the montana clematis framed it in a tangle of starry whiteness.

"Tell me about mother, Uncle Don, for there are so few here who knew her. She died so soon after we got here—four or five years—when I was twelve. Nobody knew her when she was little. Tell me everything you remember. There has never been anybody to do that—not even father."

So York lay back in his chair, with the child of his boyhood's dreams at his feet, and talked to her awhile of the mother she had lost. And long before the story ended all sense of strangeness had melted between them, and when Stella asked him of himself, the soldier answered her questions more fully and freely than he was wont to; for the tie of kinship had asserted itself, and to him it was very sweet.

"I wish you would come here and let me take care of you," she said, lifting the hazel eyes, whose glance thrilled him strangely, and laying her soft fingers upon his thin, brown hands; "I am a good nurse, and I understand sick people. I should like to take care of you, Uncle Don. You look dreadfully as though you wanted nursing up and being cared for."

"I am quite past that stage, I am glad to say," answered York, smiling. "I do not suppose I shall ever be much sounder than I am now; so you must make up your mind to a battered specimen of an uncle—not at all a show-figure to be proud of. But I don't need any more looking after than my faithful Tommy Atkins gives me; and for the present I am to remain Sir Humphrey's guest. We understand each other's ways by this time, and two old bachelors manage to shake down very comfortably together. He has been more good to me, Stella, than ever I can make you understand. But for him, I don't think you'd ever have seen your Uncle Don in the flesh. If he likes to have me share his quarters for a bit, I should not wish to make different arrangements."

"No, of course not. I quite understand; but you know there always would be a place here for you; and I would see that you were taken care of,"

"I am sure you would, my dear. But, by all I hear, you have your hands full enough without any other burden added. Now, tell me about yourself, Stella. I want to know all about you and the world you live in and the things you do. Everything has so changed since I lived in England. I want to get into touch with my country again."

So Stella began, and poured into her quiet listener's ears a detailed history of Cleethorpe parish, her numerous interests there, her various enterprises, with their varying success or failure; and almost before she knew it, she found herself disburdening herself to this man, whom she had never seen in her life before, of some of those worries and troubles and doubts which hitherto she had kept locked away in her own heart, and had scarcely cared to admit even to herself.

York spoke little, but what he said was so absolutely to the point that Stella soon experienced that gratifying feeling of being entirely understood. He himself was a man who had had occasion to originate and organise. Not for nothing had he been adjutant of his regiment in his youth, and as he rose in the service, D.A.Q.G., and acting quartermaster also. He was able to enter into the details of Stella's little parish clubs and charities, guilds and associations, with an understanding which amazed her. He made her show him all her books. He approved her methods in the main, but gave her some practical hints which she received eagerly. She thawed in his company out of her complacency, which was a manner partly assumed as a sort of defensive armour against possible adverse criticism. But York did not criticise; he examined and inquired and showed interest. He approached the situation with an open mind, she felt. He did not make light of her attempts, and she opened her heart to him with a fulness that won his own. It was only when they had done examining into all the business matters, and he was turning over the little guild membership books, with their lists of rules

and undertakings, that he said, with a kindly and thoughtful smile :

"I see you believe in a charge of small-shot rather than in one good heavy bullet !"

She looked at him in questioning perplexity.

He closed the little books and moved the small piles a little away from him as he crossed his arms upon the table and looked at her, still smiling.

"New times, new ways, I suppose, Stella ; but somehow I have a feeling that the grand old baptismal vows which are taken for us in our infancy, and which we ratify for ourselves in our youth, are worth—and more than cover and overlap—all these supplementary vows and resolutions which such little books as these suggest."

"Oh, of course, Uncle Don, we do not mean to suggest that we are improving upon our Prayer-book vows. Only, you understand, that in the different guilds different parts of these are brought prominently forward, and we try to keep the members in mind first of one portion and then of another."

"I know that is the idea, Stella. But for my part, I have had a hard enough fight seeking to keep in mind the vows once made for a lifetime. I do not want any new ones."

"But these are not new, Uncle Don. They are only put in a new way. Of course, if all the people were trying hard to keep their baptismal vows, then no more would be needed ; but—"

She paused, because he was smiling, and she did not quite understand the nature of that smile.

"I was wondering, Stella, why, when you come across people who are not making this fight, you do not expend your time and energy on trying to make them understand that they *are* pledged already, and that they are in danger of becoming deserters from the ranks, rather than in going to them and trying to get them to undertake some little fragment

of the whole, which may perhaps tend to make them satisfied that the rest may be left comfortably alone."

"Oh, Uncle Don, I don't think it does that. I wish you could talk with Mabel Brent, of Cleeport. They are doing such splendid work there amongst that difficult, shifting, half sea-faring population. I get most of my ideas from her. You see, our boys and girls so often go on from here to Cleeport, either to service or to the shops, the boys, some of them to sea. That is why I want our organisations to be in connection, that they can be handed on when they leave us. I know we have rather a large number of irons in the fire, as people call it, for one village; but that is the reason, and really, I am hoping very much that it does good."

She spoke so appealingly, so almost humbly, that York's heart was touched. He held out his hand, and drew her towards him.

"My dear child, you must not run away with the idea that I am sitting in judgment upon your methods. Nobody could be more thoroughly ignorant upon such matters than I. I am only trying to look at things from the larger outlook, to apply such experience as I have gleaned from my rough-and-tumble army life to your very different battlefield. It seems to me that you are in danger of clogging your machinery with too much detail. It may be that you are in danger of seeming to put, in some cases, the lesser before the greater. Do you understand me when I say that when first principles are grasped, details fall into order of their own accord; but that, when you begin with the details without having mastered first principles, the result is often confusion worse confounded? And almost always the originators of this confusion are the least aware of it themselves."

Stella was not quite sure that she did understand what the soldier meant. Had anybody else propounded this theory, she would simply have said: "Oh, of course," and dismissed it from her mind. But she did not say that to Colonel York, who was slowly rising to his feet.

"I should like to talk to you about a lot of things some other day, Uncle Don," she said; and with his hands upon her shoulders, and his eyes searching earnestly into hers, he answered:

"As many as ever you like, my little Stella."

Before he had got far from the house he was set upon by the small fry with eager shouts:

"Sir Tiger! Sir Tiger! Oh, do please stop! Billy Blake says he's seen a bogey in your garden! It's got its head all tied up in white, and its eyes roll round and round, first white and then black! Oh, Sir Tiger, won't you go and hunt it, like you hunted the tiger out of the jungle?"

The children were panting with excitement, and a sheepish-looking lad with a pitchfork in his hand stood by, seeking to stem the tide of revelation.

York despatched the children to their home, from the gate of which they had evidently run out, and then, turning to the boy, he said, with a touch of soldier sternness:

"Now, my boy, it's not a manly thing on your part to try and frighten little children with silly stories of ghosts and bogeys."

"But, please sir, I did see it!" asserted Billy; though, when pressed as to what he had seen, he grew confused, but all the time declared that whatever it was, it had white all round its head, and rolling, terrible eyes. The boy had passed by the boundary fence of Nun's Bower late the evening before, and had seen this phantom-like form gliding amongst the brushwood.

"Well, say no more about it, and I'll look into it myself," said York briefly; "and above all, never scare women or children with tales like this, whether you believe them yourself or no."

CHAPTER XII

KINDRED SPIRITS

A WEEK later and Archie Vanborough, having had his "little fling" in town, and having replenished his wardrobe up-to-date in a satisfactory manner, appeared at his kinsman's house as arranged, and made his first encounter with Diana upon the following morning.

Archie had taken rod and line immediately after breakfast, and was leisurely whipping the stream. This stream soon left the precincts of Nun's Bower, and entered those of Convent House, finally landing him at the head of the chain of fish-ponds, where, in spite of the brilliance of the sunshine, the trout were biting well, and Archie had just succeeded in landing a beauty, when a clear laugh caused him to look up, and instantly doff his straw hat.

He was pleasant to look upon, this clean-limbed, fair-haired, bronze-faced lad, becomingly arrayed in white flannels, active in his movements, skilful at his craft, instinct with health, and energy, and purpose. He found himself confronted by a very radiant and dazzling creature—all white and gold—who was luxuriously reclining in a cushioned punt beneath the shadow of a group of weeping-willows, which had hidden her from his sight heretofore.

But the girl had evidently been watching him, and her laugh was her tribute to his final triumph. He did not need to be told who she was. He had heard already of Esther Lynne's niece. She, it seemed, had heard of him also; for when he

began a smiling apology for "trespassing," she cut him short with a light laugh.

"Of course you would be trespassing if you were anybody else; but in this part of the world anything is permitted to a Vanborough!"

"What a happy place in which to live!" cried Archie. "And you, also, have you not taken it by conquest?"

"Oh, shocking!" cried Diana, with another silvery laugh; "don't you know that puns are quite out of date? Paradox and epigram as much as you like; but the homely, domestic pun has to take quite a back seat in these days. But perhaps you belong to the old world of which Cleethorpe is a survival! I'm quite growing peacefully fossilised here myself! Say, shall you and I put our heads together, and just wake them up a bit?"

"With all my heart!" answered Archie, laughing. "Only tell me what to do, and I am your most humble servant—your latest conquest!"

"Come, come, Archie Vanborough, the keen edge of a joke wears off by repetition. But if you are so very anxious for an enslaved position, come into the punt, and we'll have a chat. It's getting too hot to fish—or too bright. But if you like to punt down stream through the ponds into the Clee, and then after half-a-mile push up a little branch stream to Bishop's Hall, we might find Sally there, and take her into our counsels. Sally suffers from a plethora of pent-up energy, which renders her at times a slightly explosive creature. You know her brother, don't you—Rudolf Hastings?"

Diana had the easy trans-Atlantic fashion of treating the other sex, and of speaking of them. She had had many more boy than girl friends, as it happened, in her childhood, and since she had developed into her early womanhood, admiration and adulation had come to her in an unstinted fashion, which she now regarded as one of her natural rights, and accepted as the most ordinary condition of life.

The Niece of Esther Lynne

Archie desired no second invitation. After the heats of India and the Red Sea, the breezy brilliance of this English June morning was exhilarating rather than enervating. He stepped lightly into the punt, depositing his shining treasure-trove in the well.

"It's Miss Lynne's trout, you know. If I may, I'll come back with you, and present my compliments and my fish together. I hope she won't regard it in the light of a fishy compliment!"

"You incorrigible boy!" was all that Diana answered.

"I don't know what's the matter with me to-day," confessed Archie ingenuously, "I feel so beastly happy; it makes me talk rot! Do you know the feeling, Miss Conquest? Or do you only inspire it?"

Diana laughed gaily. She was not in the least embarrassed by this outspoken admiration. She leaned back amongst her cushions, and watched the active movements of the young man, as he sent the light punt swirling along. Evidently he was no novice to the art, and they soon shot through the chain of ponds, and came out into the main stream, just as it passed beneath one of the many little bridges which spanned its course through the place.

"That's one footpath to the Hall," said Diana, indicating the narrow track across a great sweep of meadow-land; "but it's much farther to walk, and I'm not in the humour for exerting myself to-day. Down below the big bridge we come to another branch stream, and if we take that, we shall get into the gardens of Bishop's Hall, and very likely Sally will be somewhere about playing golf or croquet, or some of her innumerable games. It's rather hard lines for her, having to play alone so much. Geraldine is delicate, and doesn't care for games. She's clever at music; we have rather good times together. She can play accompaniments, and that's what so few musical people can do well. She sings, too, but has rather a tiny little pipe; still, it's always in tune. Sally sings

like a bull of Bashan ; but it's great fun to hear her ! I like it best when the old Squire joins the family concert. Do you know Rudolf's father ? I'm awfully in love with him. He's the dearest old boy—one of the real old-fashioned kind, who want the world to stand still all the time, and for everything to be as it was when he was a boy, or earlier. He can't make it out the way things are spinning along. I could listen to him all day, when he gets on to that hobby-horse of his. It's just killing ! ”

“ Regular old Tory ; I know the sort. I've got a bit of that blood in me myself. I know it's no good trying to fight against the spirit of the age ; but I confess some of its developments make me feel a bit sick ! ”

“ I know what you mean,” answered Diana quickly. “ Somehow, an old country like this trying to be modern and go-ahead rather comes a cropper ; much after the fashion of an ancient female playing hockey or riding a bicycle. You see 'em at it sometimes, and the spectacle isn't specially edifying. It's prettier when they grow old gracefully, like Esther, my aunt, you know. She's just sweet ! And the old-fashioned ways we hear people talk about sound awfully sweet, too ; but I'm afraid it's no good people trying to cling to them still. They'd better make up their minds to let them go, and to help along the new ideas, and give them the grace they so badly need. If all the best sort stand aloof, swearing at progress because it upsets their old-world notions and ideals—well, then, they mustn't wonder if they see only the uglier side of it. You see, I am modern myself. New ways and new ideas suit me best. I think it's time this blessed little Sleepy Hollow got woke up ! What do you say to lending a hand ? ”

“ You have only to command me. Your will is law. How are you off for young life in this part ? ”

“ Fairly well in the district round. In Cleethorpe itself there are not many families ; but there are houses all round,

and Sally has quite a lot of friends almost as fond of games as she is. The worst of the thing is that so many things are stale. People are going cracked over this new croquet, which I thought rather slow at first, but I confess I'm getting into it, and there are several other good games; but people have their clubs and regular tournaments. There's no novelty in that. I want to think of something more original and amusing. Two brilliant people like you and me ought to have some ideas between us!"

He bowed over his punt pole, and suddenly exclaimed:

"Well, there seems a lot of water about here one way or the other. Why should we not get down boats or canoes, and institute aquatic sports? What about a swimming club, for instance? You know, the modern fashion is to have very fine water costumes, and for us to join the ladies in the water and help them. But if things here are not advanced enough for that, the girls might surely have their own club and their own matches. In foreign lakes I've seen girls swimming most beautifully, and anybody might watch them. When girls do these things gracefully, they beat us into a cocked hat, you know. I'm sure you can swim, Miss Conquest?"

Diana's eyes were bright. Archie had hit upon the very sort of sport where she knew she could not only hold her own, but in all probability excel every rival. She only wondered the idea had not occurred to herself.

"Of course I can swim," she answered; "when I was a child my father taught me all sorts of things like that. We lived in Virginia—dear ole Virginie!—I always feel I should like to end my days there. There was a big lake, and we had a bathing-hut, and father and I used to spend hours in the water in hot weather. We had canoes, too, and when it was cooler we used to shoot about like fireflies! He taught me all the Indian dodges with the paddle. He and the old negroes used to vie with one another to teach me how to do everything, just as though I had been a boy. I can shoot

and I can ride, and I can drive anything you like to put me behind! You are a genius, Mr. Vanborough—a real genius! You have hit the right nail on the head, and no mistake!”

“You called me Archie Vanborough last time,” spoke the young man, with a beaming face, and an accent of reproach in his voice; “I thought it sounded so much nicer—and more friendly.”

“Did I? I really didn’t know it. You see, that is what Sir Humphrey and Colonel York always call you—”

“Yes; so does everybody who likes me,” answered Archie, with a deprecating look which made Diana laugh.

“Very well, Archie Vanborough let it be,” she answered gaily; “for if you are to be permanently brilliant in your ideas, I shall like you immensely myself.”

By this time they had reached the fork of the river at Clee Mill, where it was joined by another stream from the south bank, and widened out into something approaching a river. Passing beneath the bridge, they quickly arrived at the junction of the little narrow rivulet which ran through Squire Hasting’s property, and joined the Clee at this point. Archie obediently turned the punt into this small water-way, and before they had proceeded far they heard themselves hailed by a loud voice, and the young man was aware of the headlong advance of a rather ungainly girl, in a short dress of blue linen, who was brandishing a croquet mallet over her head, and galloping towards them with something of the action of a camelopard.

“Here is Sally,” cried Diana, her eyes dancing with amusement; for Sally never ceased to amuse, and seldom irritated her, as she did so many others. “Come, Sally, and let me introduce Mr.—I mean Archie — Vanborough to you. He likes to be called Archie Vanborough. He thinks it sounds prettier, and matches himself. You have heard of him from your brother, no doubt!”

“Oh, rather,” answered Sally, tendering a red and gloveless

paw, and then taking a flying leap into the punt, and embracing Diana with effusion. "You fagged for him at school. He said you were A1 at making toast, and that that was your only talent."

"But it isn't," cried Diana, whilst Archie roared; "he's got a dash of real genius hidden away somewhere. No, you needn't stare at him like that. You wouldn't believe it to look at him, I know; but I've unearthed the treasure, and mean to keep it as my own discovery."

"You take care that I shall not be puffed up by your favour," remarked Archie, as he took up his pole again. "And now, whither is it your royal pleasure that I should take you? Up stream, or down?"

"Oh, let's lie a little in the shade, and talk things over," answered Diana; and this rivulet being well shaded by alders and birches and willow scrub, it was easy to find a place where they could find luxurious shadow, and sit at ease to talk out Archie's scheme of waking up the energies of Cleethorpe and its environs by a succession of aquatic sports.

"We must have a fleet of canoes!" cried Diana, in her imperious way; "boats, perhaps, we can hire from Cleeport, only I am afraid they will be sea-tubs chiefly; though perhaps we might find some of lighter build. But canoes are the real thing—Canadian canoes for preference. I wonder where we could get enough. I don't mind buying a couple straight out for Convent House. I should love to go shooting about, and I'll teach Esther, too. She's light and quick of eye, and fond of the water."

"I'll get daddy to buy one or two, and Rudolf shall, too. He's quite rich now, so he must be made to stump up!"

"I'll start the club, and present half-a-dozen canoes!" cried Archie, who, having more money than he knew what to do with, and no unhealthy tastes, such as run away with the largest fortunes, could afford to stand godfather to any scheme of his own proposing.

"You're a trump!" cried Sally ecstatically, smiting him over the back with the weapon she happened to have with her. "I've always longed to canoe, but somehow, it's never come my way. We've got boats; but they are all rather tubby. I think mother was afraid to have anything light when we were kids; and in this old fossil of a place, what one has once, one goes on having. I believe dad would rather have a model ark than any other kind of craft, if he could only be sure of the right pattern!"

The idea of a girls' swimming club was also eagerly caught up by Sally. She had learned to swim in her childhood, but had few opportunities of practising, since she was not allowed to make any use of the pool near the house, where the gardeners might see her; and though there were baths at Cleeport, and she sometimes ran over on her bicycle, they were not good enough to be attractive, and the beach bathing she despised as being too slow altogether.

"I don't know what they'll say about it. Mother has awfully stodgy ideas!" she cried, with the frankness of her nature. "I really don't think dad would mind so much—he likes girls to be able to do things; but mother thinks such a lot of what she calls the proprieties," and Sally's face was a study.

Archie was choking with mirth. Sally, as the product of a high Tory father and a "stodgy mother," bent on the proprieties, was certainly rather an astonishing specimen. Diana caught the meaning of his mirth, and her eyes were full of laughter. Sally looked from one to the other, accustomed to excite a mirth not wholly intelligible to herself, but never resenting it when she felt it to be kindly in its character.

"We must make Stella join!" cried Diana; "she wants shaking up. We won't let her say she has no time. Parish business always slacks off a little in the summer, Esther says, when the night-schools and guilds and all that sort of

mysterious work shuts down for a spell. I guess folks find that they can employ themselves better out of doors. How many love-making guilds do you reckon to have in this village, Sally?"

Diana felt quite kindly disposed towards Stella, whose feelings she knew she had hurt on more than one occasion. It seemed to her ridiculous that the girl should take everything so seriously, and make mole-hills into mountains, as she was prone to do. But all the same, Diana, when she took an idea into her head, was not going to be hindered by any scruple as to whose feelings might be hurt. The singing of the village choir she had found excruciating, and she was teaching the boys improved methods, and winning their hearts by her merry ways, her grace, and beauty, and daring talk. She knew Stella did not like it; but that was a matter of minor consequence, if the result were satisfactory. She knew that she meant to make Rudolf Hastings another of her slaves, so soon as he should return home at the rising of the House. It was thought he might possibly be free even before that. She did not know exactly what his relations with Stella were, but she did not intend to take a second place. It was not that she had any present intention of marrying the Squire's son, any more than she thought of marrying the bright-faced boy in the punt, or the white-headed Sir Humphrey Vanborough, or any of those youths in London last year, who had flitted round the brilliance of her presence. She had truly said to her indignant accusers that she did not look upon every "boy" she met in the light of a possible husband. Nevertheless, had she faced the fact, she might have learned that she did regard each one in the light of a fresh "conquest," as Archie had chosen to put it. She was not unfamiliar with the pun upon her name, nor did its aptness in any way displease her. She liked to feel that her motto was "*Veni, vidi, vici*"; and so far it had never been otherwise. And if, after her hour of triumph, there had come a gathering cloud, she had simply

turned her back upon the threatening tempest, and had sought smiling skies and pastures new elsewhere.

At Cleethorpe she was conscious of feeling extremely happy. She decided she was being very good. She had brought sunshine into Esther's life. She was going to be quite a little special Providence to poor Sally, giving her friendship and companionship, and perhaps, at last, helping her to cast that ungainly chrysalis crust which had enveloped her so long. She meant also to do something towards brightening and widening Stella's outlook upon life. She had not quite decided yet what form this idea should take; but when, a few minutes after gliding into the main stream on the homeward journey, they saw Stella and York walking slowly along the footpath in the direction of Convent House, a new notion suddenly flashed into Diana's active brain.

Why shouldn't Stella and poor Colonel York make each other happy? That game of uncle and niece was only a pretty fiction between them. He was a kinsman, but not a near one. He needed somebody to look after him, and Stella had a genius for devotion. And Diana could spare him from her train! Was she conscious how strongly that argument weighed with her? A man with a haggard, pain-worn face, a halting gait and a shattered constitution, was not the kind of admirer she cared about. She was sorry for him. She admired his quiet courage, and appreciated his services and devotion to his country; but she had no particular use for him, and he and Stella seemed so well suited. No doubt he would get stronger, and probably he had comfortable means; he would get some light work which would be sufficient for the modest needs of simple, unassuming people. In a few seconds Diana had mapped it all out clearly in her brain, and was quite prepared to cultivate Stella as she had not done before.

"Hi! stop there!" cried Sally, springing up at sight of the pair. "Look here, Colonel York, let Archie—I mean

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Mr.—no, I mean Archie Vanborough punt you home, and we'll walk with Stella! We've ten thousand things to say to her, and you looked jacked up! Come on, Di, it's pretty heavy work punting up the Clee. We'll walk with Stella, and let Colonel York have the punt."

So the three girls walked together along the path, Archie keeping his eyes in that direction, and admiring the graceful, free movements of the tall girl between her two companions. By contrast Sally looked almost grotesque, and Stella's pensive prettiness suffered a certain eclipse. All the same, Archie could see that she was a pretty little thing, and he decided that life at Nun's Bower would not lack interest and amusement. He had been roving the world for above a year. The idea of a settled life for a spell was not without attractions.

Esther Lynne and Sir Humphrey were together in the garden of Convent House when the punt and the pedestrians entered it together. The three girlish faces were very bright, and as Archie sprang ashore at the landing-stage and assisted York out, he looked as merry as the merry, merry summer-tide itself.

The girls were pouring their broadsides of information and aspiration into the ears of their elders. Diana had hold of Sir Humphrey's arm, Sally was prancing up and down before Esther, her voice rising almost to a shout, Stella, much quieter, was yet quite disposed to be roused and interested. Boating was attractive. The net-work of little streams suggested numerous possibilities. Possibly, she thought, some new industry or innocent recreation for the village boys—often her chiefest anxiety—might be the outcome of these proposed and nebulous schemes.

Diana's voice suddenly made itself heard above all the others.

"Let's have an impromptu picnic out here, just our party as we stand. I'll back Esther's larder to stand the strain! No; don't let anybody else bother. I'll just shoot off to the

house, and see what I can conjure up. And we'll all drink the health of the new aquatic club, and send the hat round at the close for subscriptions ! ”

With a roguish laugh into Sir Humphrey's face, she sped upon her errand ; and all falling in with her views, the little *al fresco* meal was quickly arranged. Plans and projects were discussed. Ways and means were considered, and Archie was declared to be simply bristling with ideas, some reckless, some impracticable, but others distinctly alluring.

“ He is quite a treasure—that boy of yours ! ” cried Diana to Sir Humphrey, as the merry meal wore to its conclusion. “ You'd never think to look at him how replete with ideas he could be ! I expect he'll end by drowning himself, or the whole show of us as well, perhaps. But what's the odds so long as you're happy ! ”

As the three bachelors somewhat later in the day retraced their steps to Nun's Bower, Sir Humphrey looked smilingly at the bright-faced lad at his side, and said :

“ Well, Archie, you seem to have found kindred spirits, anyway ! ”

And Archie's answer was spoken with the utmost fervour : “ Rather ! I say, that girl is just a stunner ! ”

CHAPTER XIII

DEVELOPMENTS

ESTHER LYNNE was in those days a very happy woman. The coming of her sister's child had been a source of deep and lasting joy to her. After a very brief season of doubt as to whether the brilliant young thing would be happy in so quiet a life, she had reached the conclusion that she need have no fears on that score. Diana appeared to be one of those happily-constituted persons who make their own sunshine. She seemed not to know the meaning of the word depression. She was never dull and never bored. She was warmly affectionate towards Esther herself, and had won the goodwill of the whole community. Her daring speeches and her vagaries were a constant source of entertainment to Cleethorpe, and it was hard to believe that the girl had been hardly more than three months in the place, her influence there was so strong. In her exuberant vitality Esther seemed to renew her own youth—that youth which for her had been so swiftly shadowed, and had taken to itself wings all too soon.

Added to this was another happiness in the return of her old-time friend and comrade, Humphrey Vanborough. And Esther herself scarcely knew to which of these two causes to attribute the sense of immense content and well-being which at this time seemed her portion in life. Nor was she one prone to over-much introspection. Hers was one of those finely-balanced and happily-constituted natures, growing more and more rare as the world whirls rapidly along in its headlong fashion, not over-much concerned with itself, not strung to the

tension of modern requirements, to meet the demands of an artificial activity, whether for self-devotion, self-culture, or an unconscious thirst for amusement or novelty. The nervous strain which is the inevitable *sequitur* of these conditions, and which asserts itself sooner or later, was spared her. The childlike heart and spirit were hers still. As in the past she had accepted without murmur, or self-pity, or any sense of injury, a life which to her world had seemed full of trial and wearisome care, now she welcomed her happiness without questioning too closely of what it consisted. She accepted the joy, as she had accepted the sorrow, as the portion assigned to her by an all-wise and an all-loving Father, and as His gift she rejoiced in it, and took it gladly to her heart.

"You are growing younger and prettier every day, Esther," Diana would sometimes say laughingly to her; and Esther, looking into the bright, young face, would answer: "Then you must be making me so, Di."

Diana herself thought there might probably be another cause; but she held her peace. Even now, after the flight of a week or two, she could not venture upon "chaffing" Esther about Sir Humphrey. That extreme gentleness and sweetness which had won the girl's rather wayward heart, and made her aunt dearer to her than she had once believed that any person would be again, held within its compass an element of dignity and delicate reticence which had more than once stopped Diana's tongue upon the verge of a playful impertinence. And yet Esther had never rebuked her, or appeared to know that she was exercising wholesome restraint.

"How does she do it?" Di had often asked of herself. She had sometimes been present when Esther had interviewed an offending servant, or recalcitrant village lad, or some angry woman, hot with a real or supposed injury, who had come tearing up to Convent House for help or redress. And again and again had the girl marvelled at the quiet tact, the fearless candour, and the gentle dignity which invariably brought the

offender to a proper attitude of mind. No anger, or excitement, or ruffled composure ever betrayed itself; but an inflexible firmness, together with an insight and sympathy that set Diana wondering where it had been obtained.

"In the school of life, my dear," Esther once answered, smiling, when the girl put a frank question. "Experience is the best master, as a wise man said; but his lessons are very dear. When we are young we think we can dispense with them, and rule ourselves and others by the light of reflected wisdom, or our own intuitions. We learn differently as we go on in life; but yet it is good to be young, and to feel that the world lies at our feet. Only we must not be led away by our own sense of strength and power; we must be willing to learn the lessons life has to teach us."

Diana's eyes kindled at those words. Were they meant as a hint or a warning to her? She sprang up, and kissed Esther in her sudden and vehement fashion, though outward demonstrations were not very frequent with her. Yet in her heart she felt that she was strong enough to rule her own life, and that of others also, without over-much guidance. But she did not put the thoughts into words, lest Esther should read between the lines.

Diana had looked forward on Sir Humphrey's return to watching the immediate consummation of an elderly romance. She was certain that her aunt and he had been lovers once—whether openly declared or not. The whole place had expected them to make a match of it; even the old cottage women had said as much. Her mother's sudden and unexpected marriage had been the means of hindering that consummation long since. But to her youthful imagination there appeared no reason of any sort why, if they still cared for one another, they should not immediately take up the threads of the old courtship, and fulfil the expectations which had once been formed respecting them. There was nothing in the world to hinder them now; and people as old and far older

married every day of the year. Her young impatience saw no reason why there should be any delay at all. She had expected the matter to be settled within the first week, and when day after day passed by, and she saw no sign of anything but the renewal of a very cordial and pleasant friendship, she began to question and to wonder.

The intercourse between Convent House and Nun's Bower was almost constant. The gate between the two properties remained permanently unlocked. Sir Humphrey and his friends came to and fro almost at will, and scarcely an evening passed without bringing one or more of them to listen to Diana's music, to take a hand at whist, or to sit within the shelter of the cloistered garden, whilst the nightingales or warblers beside the stream and pools made sweet accompaniment for their talk; and they would rise sometimes and wander away through the dim paths and alleys of the garden, under conditions so suggestive and so appropriate that Diana would sometimes say half impatiently to herself:

"Well, if it does not come off to-night, I shall not believe in it at all!"

Gradually there was stealing over Diana a feeling of keen interest and admiration where Sir Humphrey Vanborough was concerned. From the first he had attracted her. A man who had done good work, and who had achieved something in the eyes of the world had always appealed to her. Power was her fetish, whether she knew it or not. She loved to feel her own power; she loved to exert it over others. It gave her a thrill of exceeding delight to feel it being exercised over her, and doubly so when she was conscious of a reflex current, whereby she, in her turn, made her own power felt over the very individual whose influence she was aware of succumbing to. So it was between her and Sir Humphrey. He fascinated her imagination; he even swayed her opinions, and inspired her with the desire to stand well in his sight. And she was perfectly aware that she in some measure

captivated him. His kind eyes lighted at sight of her. When she sat down to sing to him, his glance rested upon her with a satisfaction and pleasure of which she was delightfully conscious, and which quickened her pulses and gave an added depth and expression to her rich tones. Although nominally it was she and Archie who were the comrades and friends, and it was with him she more often than not paired herself, when they strolled forth into the softened glories of the June nights, yet she was ever more and more aware of the growing bond between her and the older man, and already was beginning to delight in making tiny trials of her power over him.

"Who does he come to see?" she asked of herself one night, as she lingered in the garden after their guests had gone, loath to leave the scents and the beauties and the glamour of the summer night. "What is the magnet that draws him here? Of course, he has been used to easy intercourse all his life; but is that all? And if not, what is the attraction?"

Diana felt all her pulses tingling somewhat. She and Sir Humphrey had been walking together awhile up and down the yew avenue, whilst Esther and York had finished a game of backgammon together. Archie had been splashing about in a Canadian canoe, which had arrived that very day, and of whose safe balance he was not entirely assured. They had talked of many things together, he and she. Often he told her little anecdotes about her mother, and she told him of her early life, and the varied experiences through which she had passed. He always listened as a man does who is interested in what is told him. When she had spoken a few words of her father's sudden death—a matter to which she seldom alluded—he had just laid his hand softly for a moment upon the one resting lightly on his arm, and she had felt herself thrill at the touch.

Now, standing and looking out over the beautiful dew-drenched world with the silver and sable cloak of night enshrouding it, Diana was conscious even yet of that curious

little heart-throb, and turning her gaze towards the lighted windows of the quaint old house she had left, she found herself asking a series of questions which had certainly never suggested themselves to her before.

“After all, is she not happier as she is? Would it not be a mistake to change too entirely the tranquil course of such a life? Would it really be for her happiness? I am not at all sure. Esther is just sweet as she is—quite perfect—I wouldn’t have one single thing different about her. But would it suit her to be married? Would people at all laugh at her?—at them? Not at him! There is never anything the least absurd in a man marrying somewhat late in life. He is still in his prime—splendid, I call him! But Esther?—how would it be with her? She is a perfect darling as she is, and quite, quite happy and content. I’m not at all sure that she wants anything different, or would be happier for it. Things can never be as they once were. You may try to tie up the threads, but they won’t always join right. They are perfectly happy in their friendship. It is a beautiful thing to see. I’m not sure that I want it changed for anything else, and I’m not a bit sure that it would be for their happiness, or that either of them want it really. If they do, why does it still hang fire? And if not—well, I begin to think that they have judged rightly for themselves.”

Diana, having reached this conclusion, suddenly became aware of a curious illumination of spirit. She did not trouble to examine into it. In fact, she was not altogether unacquainted with the sensation. She had known moments before of a similar kind. The experience was always exhilarating and delightful, though latterly it had been rare. She sped towards the house with a wonderful grace and swiftness, and the light in her eyes was so vivid and intense when she entered the room that Esther looked at her with a tender, questioning smile.

“It is such a glorious night. Archie has been trying the

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canoe for me. I think it's all right ; but he is not quite satisfied. He'll be round to-morrow early for another experiment. We are going to have a perfectly lovely summer—I am quite, quite sure of that. Esther, you darling duck ! Tell me, are you getting the leastest wee bit tired of me ? Do you think I had better make tracks before I've had time to do any mischief here ? I'll go in a moment if you think I ought—if you are tired of me—if I am in the way—”

“My dearest child, what are you talking about ? Are you getting tired of the monotony of Convent House ? I was just hoping we were going to be lively enough to give you some real pleasure and enjoyment at last.”

Diana suddenly flung herself down at Esther's feet—a graceful heap of filmy white drapery. Her fashion of treating her beautiful clothes still somewhat exercised her aunt, although she had ceased to remonstrate.

“Tired of Convent House ! No, Esther, I'm not such an ungrateful idiot as that. I'm happier here than I once thought I ever could be again. I just love it—I love you—I love everything. I am happy all the time. Everything is just sweet. But after all, it's your house—I've no real right here—no claim upon you—”

Esther stopped her with a kiss.

“My dearest child, what has come to you ? Who could have so near or dear or close a claim ? You are my very own flesh and blood. You are the dearest thing in the world to me. This is your home as much as it is mine, as long as you care to make it so !”

Diana rose to her knees, and flung her arms about Esther in an almost passionate paroxysm of affection, which Esther was somewhat perplexed to account for.

“Oh, I hope you will never, never, never regret the day you took me in !” cried the girl, with sudden intensity.

Early next morning Archie Vanborough was at the ponds of Convent House making experiment with the canoe, and half

hoping that his energy and early rising might be rewarded with a sight of Diana, to whom he had given a hint as to his intentions. She, however, did not appear, and presently, having satisfied himself that the canoe was all safe and as little tippy as such craft can be, he tied it up in the boathouse again, and strolled back towards Nun's Bower, not making straight for the house, but taking a thick shrubby path towards a little deep pool, which Sir Humphrey used as a bathing place, and where he went almost daily on rising for a morning plunge.

As he neared the place he saw York standing in the overgrown path, with something in his hand, which he was scrutinising closely. Archie came up and asked what it was. York held it out for his inspection, and he saw a murderous-looking knife, with its edge like a razor for sharpness.

"Hullo!" he exclaimed; "where did you get that thing, and what are you doing with it?"

York turned a rather curious expression upon Archie as he answered, pointing to a little heap of earth and fallen leaves in the path:

"I found it there, embedded in the earth, edge upwards, just lightly concealed by the leaves—most ingeniously set. If I had not been walking slowly, and had not just touched it with my stick, I might have stepped upon it myself."

"But what in thunder is it doing there? Who the dickens can have put it?"

"That is just what I should like to know; for it has been put with a purpose."

The sound of splashing not far distant told them that Sir Humphrey was enjoying his morning swim in the pool. Both men knew that in these hot June mornings he was wont to walk through the shrubby paths to the water in his long-quilted dressing-gown and slippers, take his bath, and return in the same garb. A man so shod, stepping upon an edge like that unguardedly might almost sever his foot in twain, and bleed

to death before assistance could well reach him, or, perhaps, fall a victim to lockjaw. The thing was horrible to contemplate. Some of the healthy red left Archie's face. A stern expression, like that upon York's thin features, settled upon his own. Suddenly he sprang forward and groped a little. The path was dim and dark, thickly overgrown; but he had seen something, and now pulled at it viciously. It was an ingeniously hidden bit of cord, just placed so as to cause a man to trip in such a fashion that he must inevitably have brought his foot heavily down upon that murderous, shining blade.

"Holy Moses!" muttered the young fellow, as he and York stood facing each other, "what devil's brew is this?"

"Devil's brew, indeed!" spoke York sternly; "I only wish to goodness I had been a few minutes earlier, and had caught the devil at work!"

"You think it has been done since the boss went down?" quoth Archie, with a glance in the direction of the sounds of splashing.

"I believe so. Sir Humphrey does not take the same path every day. He was evidently watched for, and the thing done—the trap laid immediately after he had passed, to make sure of him on the return journey. I happened to wake early, and came prowling along just a little while later. I thought I heard a rabbit scuttle away; I remember thinking that had I been in India I should have thought it was a snake gliding through the grass. There was a sort of sinuous sound about it; but I merely supposed that to be my fancy. When my stick touched metal it stopped me, and I looked and saw. If I had been a walker, as other men are, I might have gone full tilt into the diabolical thing myself. It was set as firm as a rock. I had some trouble in getting it up. Though, as I am well shod, the results would not have been so serious."

"Serious enough," returned Archie grimly, looking at the murderous blade; "what a horrid-looking knife! Looks as

if it had been stolen from the house, too! There are murderous weapons and to spare hanging up there."

"Yes; it's Indian workmanship," returned York. "Looks to me like a Goorka knife, or some such thing. It has probably, as you say, been taken from the house, and sharpened to this keenness. I want to know a little more about it, and what it was placed there for."

"I should have said that the boss hadn't an enemy in the world," spoke Archie impetuously, "and yet it seems plain it was meant to do him a pretty deadly sort of injury."

"That seems pretty clear," returned York. "It must have been meant for him. Had we been in India one might have understood it—"

"Why, even there he seemed to be universally beloved."

"Yes, in measure; but a man never lives all those years dispensing even-handed justice without stirring up some amount of enmity in many quarters. But over here—I confess that is the puzzle. And yet—well, Archie, I have had a vague suspicion before that something is a bit queer at the house yonder. Have you ever heard or seen anything odd?"

"Not that I know of. How do you mean?"

"Have you ever heard noises at night that you can't altogether account for?"

"Bless you, no! When I go to bed I go to sleep. I don't take any account of noises. Besides, if I did hear any I shouldn't be surprised. Old houses like that are always given to rats and so forth, aren't they?"

"Yes, that's what I've always said myself, and not troubled my head over the matter. But now I remember, Sir Humphrey told me the very first morning after we arrived—or the next—that he thought I was coming into his room at night. The door seemed to open; but I never gave the matter much thought till I began to hear strange noises myself."

"And you think?"

"I did not think it till now; but I am beginning to wonder,

in face of this, whether there may not be a plot on foot against Sir Humphrey !”

“Great Jehoshaphat—why?”

“That I cannot say. It is not unheard of that when houses remain empty an indefinite number of years, people who have no business there make use of them for illicit purposes. Only that sort of thing seems rather remote in the twentieth century. If these were days of smugglers and coiners one could better understand the possible motive. As it is, I am at sea. But I shall do what I can to find out.”

“You will tell him, of course.”

“Yes; I am waiting till he comes back to show him what we have found. If there be danger of any sort, he should be on his guard. Here he comes. Archie, put that cord as it was, and we will show the whole devil’s trap as we found it.”

Sir Humphrey looked and listened and examined with that quiet, judicial, and impersonal air which he had acquired in his long term of office. He made very few comments, but let nothing escape him, and in the end he laid a hand upon York’s shoulder, saying:

“Under Providence I think I owe to you an escape from what might have proved a very serious accident. I hope the plotter will prove to be no more dangerous than a very mischievous boy, or perhaps some poacher or vagabond who may have a desire to clear Nun’s Bower of its present occupier. Don’t say anything about it. I will keep my eyes and ears open, and most likely if the fellow be not scared away, he may play into our hands. It may prove to be the mad act of some insane person. But time will show. If there is any sort of concerted plan, we are certain to have fresh developments as time goes on.”

CHAPTER XIV

THE JOCUND MONTH OF JUNE

"A PRETTY sight, Esther, is it not?"

"I think I have never seen anything prettier. How happy they all look! And how they are enjoying themselves!"

"The privacy of your garden has been seriously menaced," added Sir Humphrey, smiling at his companion. "I wonder what the old-time residents of Convent House would have thought of our twentieth century sports?"

Esther's smiling gaze swept up and down the chain of fish-ponds, which were alive with colour and motion. The water sparkled beneath the summer sun, reflecting the deep blue and white dapple of the sky, together with the vivid green of the alder and willow bushes fringing the margin on the farther side. On this side was a smooth bank of emerald turf, sloping from a wide gravel terrace, and by the brink of the water grew many rare and beautiful water plants, and a zone of water-lilies and clumps of sedges where the warblers nested and made music for Esther all night long. But there were many places free of choice plant or covering reed, where the light canoes might put in at will. Esther made the whole flotilla welcome to her hospitality. The garden of Convent House had become the regular rallying-point for the aquatic club, quickly started and rapturously supported by the young people of the district. There was nothing Esther loved better than seeing happy young life about her, and after the long seclusion of the past years she seemed to be stepping forth into a new world of sunshine and joyousness.

She looked up now into her old friend's face, and the light in her soft brown eyes was very intense.

"I think those nuns of olden days would have felt much as I do to-day, Humphrey: that it is good to see the young enjoying their youth, and that when our own is passed, we can live it again with and through them; and perhaps with a happiness deeper than they can quite understand or appreciate."

He looked at her, at the serene tranquillity of her still fair face, at the shining sweetness of her liquid brown eyes, at the upright and slender figure, graceful in its outlines, and touched by that indefinable dignity and gentle aloofness which is the outcome of a lonely life that has held within its compass a long sorrow and burden silently and bravely borne. He looked, and as he did so, there came a new shining into his own eyes.

But he, too, had learnt reserve and patience in a different, though in some sort a kindred, school. The reticence, the calmness, the patience, which puzzled and almost fretted the spirit of Diana, was the natural result of training and of temperament to these two. Neither desired to snatch at happiness, to precipitate any sudden consummation. The long years of the past rolled between them in some sort as a great gulf. They had joined hands joyfully across this gulf. It was good to know, to feel, that friendship bridged it so firmly and so well; and for the moment that was enough. The rest—if there were more to follow—could wait.

Sir Humphrey's eyes dwelt earnestly upon the face of the woman he had loved all through the years of his youth, and whose image had stood betwixt him and that life to which a man in his position naturally looks forward, and in his eyes she was still as fair as ever. But there came to him the question whether it could be possible that she should wish to change the tranquil current of her life, even for one which might be outwardly almost as sheltered and tranquil.

With the modesty which is inherent in all finely-tempered

and generously-developed natures, Sir Humphrey felt how little he himself had to offer. He was close upon sixty. His health, though seemingly untouched by the Indian climate, might possibly give way unexpectedly before many years had passed. Esther's whole life since her girlhood had been spent nursing a failing father. Was it fair to contemplate asking of her a second similar task—or even its possibility? She was still so young in his eyes, her silvery hair notwithstanding. She ought to enjoy this spell of tardy summer-tide untouched by other cares. He would wait; he would watch; he would seek to discover how it was with her. He had been patient all these years; he could surely be patient still. She was so near him now, their intercourse was so free and sweet. That, at least, was his inalienably—if he did not recklessly endanger it by some false or precipitate step. A woman's soul is a sealed book to a man, more so, perhaps, than his to her.

That tranquil reticence and reserve of spirit which had left its impress even upon Diana's youthful impetuosity was well known to her old friend, who, in spite of their intimacy, had never entirely penetrated it. It was to him one of her greatest attractions, lending to her and encircling her with a certain soft mystery which made their friendship full of charm and of little unexpected surprises. No; he did not desire her in any sort other than she was. She had been his ideal woman through his life; she was not less so now that her youth had passed, and she stood aside to watch the pastimes of the young as a spectator, not as a partaker, yet with a full and sweet sympathy of one whose heart will never grow old.

"Esther! Esther! look at my babies! Don't they make wonderful progress!"

Diana's clear, young voice came ringing over the water, as a large canoe, more firmly balanced than some others, owing to a contrivance of ballast devised by York, came skimming towards them in a somewhat irregular fashion. Diana was

lying at ease against the cushions in the hinder part, directing the zealous, but rather uncertain, efforts of the Rectory twins, who, with a small paddle each, were delightedly splashing about in imitation of their elders, and forcing the little light craft along in a zig-zag course, to their own unbounded delight. As they saw the spectators on the bank they redoubled their efforts, shouting out joyously their baby-greeting :

“Auntie Miss Lynne! Auntie Miss Lynne!—Sir Tiger! Sir Tiger!” For York, having in some mysterious fashion developed into “Uncle Don,” the higher-sounding title had reverted once more to Sir Humphrey.

“Yes, yes, darlings, we see you! You are doing beautifully! But take care, my pets, take care! It is such a tippy little boat, Di dear, do you think it is quite safe for them?”

“Oh, as safe as a house! They’re as right as rain, those two!” cried Diana, laughing; “and if anything happens, I’ll undertake to haul out the drowned kittens all safe and sound! Besides, in about two two’s they’ll be able to swim themselves; won’t you, kittens? I carry them out of their depths every day on my back, and they splash themselves back into shallow water, just holding on to my pigtail behind. Very soon they’ll despise even that frail support.”

At this moment up came Sally, splashing about lustily in a very light outrigger, with sliding seat, which she was striving to master. She could scull well enough in an ordinary boat, but the slider bothered her, and the exceeding lightness of the craft caused her to sway perilously from side to side. Diana’s clear laugh rang over the water :

“Go it, my dear! That’s something like style! One good crab, and you’ll be overboard! Look out! You’ll have your right scull in the reeds in about no time! Then you’ll be over like a shot. Here, stop!—or you’ll foul us next. Easy a bit, and take a look round you! That’s it. Now, how do you find yourself? Not quite so easy as it looks, is it?”

Sally's face was a boiled lobster colour ; she wore the same dress as Di—a white serge skirt, with a fine white flannel shirt, a red tie and sash, and a coat to put on at will. But somehow no one would have guessed to look at them that their club dress was identical. When Diana brought her skiff skilfully to shore, handed out the "babies"—to the relief of Esther—and invited Sir Humphrey for a paddle, standing up with the longer paddle in her hands, prepared to play the part of gondolier whilst he took his ease in the rear part—her tall, slender figure, instinct with strength and grace, formed an extraordinary contrast to that of Sally, who had shoved herself towards the bank, and landed with that elephantine leap of hers which always convulsed Di each time she saw it. Sally was not heavy or really clumsy, or she would have had her boat over in a second ; but she managed to convey the impression of clumsiness and ponderous weight, whilst Diana, with her out-of-the-way height, and with considerable breadth of shoulder and development of muscular strength, looked fairy-like by comparison.

Archie came dashing up through the water in a rainbow cloud of spray. He, too, sprang ashore, nearly sending his canoe under in doing so.

"Well, Miss Sally, and how do you and the skiff hit it off together?"

"Oh, it's a bit of a beast—but I'll best it yet!" answered Sally, with her customary fine frankness of diction. "I've always longed to manage a sliding seat, especially since Rudolf said it wasn't the sort of thing for girls to do. When he takes that high and mighty tone, I always yearn and burn to do the things. I mean to go at it tooth and nail, and get a dab at it before he comes home. He'll be so awfully disgusted. He's got a touch of the governor in him. It comes out different, you know ; but it's there, all the same. And I can coax dad a deal better than Rudolf. Not that I bother much about him. One's not bound to obey one's brother, and he's a good

sort mostly; but he's got some of the mater's stodgy ideas, and that always riles me a bit."

"I'm going to try that racer next, Sally," cried Di, as with her new passenger she skimmed off along the shining water. "Esther, have some tea ready for us soon. We shall all be like fishes by four o'clock. There's quite a gathering out to-day. Be a darling and feed us all. I'll tell them they needn't be shy of coming. I want to have a talky-talky—a real palaver presently with the club girls. For the Cleethorpe Regatta comes on early in August, and if we mean to make entries we must begin to think about it and settle something. I rather think we'll start a county regatta of our own, or at least, some water sports and games. Things are humming very well, considering we've only just started. Archie has been a host in himself. You are quite a benefactor, Sir Humphrey, to have imported such a delightful and inventive genius into the place. All the girls declare it is going to be a delightful summer, and the last two have been so dull, they say."

It was true that this water-club had been started at a very propitious moment. The previous year, owing to the war, and the one before, perhaps because of the unsettled condition of affairs and the war-rumours in the air, had been very quiet ones through the district, and this year, owing to Court mourning, many families owning the large places round had refrained from going up to town in the usual way, but had remained at their country seats. This made the young people all the more willing and eager for any diversion which might offer itself; and the sudden and complete fashion in which sleepy little Cleethorpe had suddenly developed into an aquatic centre, with a regular flotilla of canoes, boats, and even a couple of gondolas, had taken the whole place by storm.

It was a capital district for water sports. A network of small streams meandered through the peaceful meadows and formed connecting links (or divisions, as you choose to take

it) between the various properties. These streams were too narrow for the most part for boats, and there were frequent rapids, or fallen trees, or a too great tangle of reeds and sedges for navigation to be easy. But light canoes, which could be dragged ashore and carried round obstructions, were the very thing for the country, and willing arms and hands set to work in dozens of places to clear away obstructions, so that the waterways might be more readily available; and already it had been discovered that Diana Conquest and Archie Vanborough were the presiding spirits of the new pastime, and that there was no pleasanter rendezvous for rest and refreshment on a hot afternoon than the garden of Convent House, where all members were made welcome by Esther Lynne, with a sweet and ready hospitality which put all intruders at ease.

Moreover, it was Miss Lynne who had permitted a little backwater in her garden to be used as the housing-place for all the club craft. She had erected there a big, rough boat-house, large enough to accommodate all the boats and canoes; and what was more, she told off one of her under-gardeners to keep these clean, and swab them out, and look to the proper housing of the cushions in a little arbour close by, where they would keep dry in any weather. So it was natural that her house should be a gathering-place; and the frequent appearance of Sir Humphrey Vanborough, either upon the water or in the gardens of Nun's Bower or Convent House, was not without its element of attraction. Diana sometimes told him that she thought his sobriquet should be changed from "Sir Tiger" to "Sir Lion," for he was becoming quite a lion in the neighbourhood, whether he knew it or not.

Diana liked to get Sir Humphrey to herself sometimes, and sweep along through the chain of ponds and down into the main stream below. She was not unaware of the admiring glances which followed her progress in and amongst the other craft, nor the impression produced by her beauty, her grace, her skill. She liked to know that Sir Humphrey witnessed

her small triumphs. She had come to value the quietly appreciative glance of his steady, kindly eyes. He was one of the few men she habitually met who did not pay her compliments, either extravagant, playful, or humble, as the case might be. Though he treated her with the kindly intimacy of an old friend, he never over-stepped the limits of his old-world code of fine courtesy and good breeding. Modern as she was herself, and used to the outspoken *camaraderie* in which she had been reared, this chivalrous respect and reserve charmed her more than anything she had hitherto experienced. She began in Sir Humphrey's presence to tone down her own vocabulary in some sort. She was not conscious of any restraining influence ; their intimacy was very real, and she was always happy and at ease with him ; yet, for all that, he exercised a silent power upon her, the strength of which she would have been astonished to discover had the matter ever entered her thoughts.

That very day she heard a few words spoken by some of the club members who were leaving the boat-house whilst she was tying up her canoe in the shadow—words which sent hot thrills through her pulses, though she affected to herself to laugh in silent mirth.

"Isn't she lovely? All the boys are mad about her, and really one doesn't wonder. But I don't much think they have a chance."

"There is safety in numbers, you mean?"

"Well, I didn't mean that exactly ; I was thinking that she looked as though she might be booked already. Have you noticed Sir Humphrey Vanborough?"

"Why, he's old enough to be her father."

"Men marry wives young enough to be their daughters every day."

"That's true ; and often I think those are the wives who have the best time of it. Sir Humphrey is perfectly charming, and he isn't a bit old. Only I thought—"

But by this time the speakers had got out of earshot, and Diana, sincerely glad that she had insisted upon landing her companion before taking the canoe to its moorings, emerged from the shadows with shining eyes and laughing lips.

"How girls do love pairing off their acquaintances!" she said to herself; "and what mare's nests they do get hold of!"

Nevertheless, there was a peculiar brilliancy about Diana that afternoon as she made the centre of the white-clad bevy of merry girls, towering above them in height, seeming by natural right to take her place as their queen and champion. They had many matters to discuss together, but all seemed to look to Di for guidance; and she regarded Archie Vanborough as her henchman and right hand. He was deputed to make an expedition to Cleeport, and discover whether, at the approaching regatta, there were any "events" coming off in which the Cleethorpe Girls' Club could take part.

"We won't go in to be beaten, mind that, Archie," spoke Diana, in her imperious way. "We must be victorious if we put in an appearance at all. Women can always beat men if they try!"

"Oh, gracious, yes!" cried Archie, with a droll side-glance towards a group of the despised sex who were kindly permitted to be "honorary" members of the Girls' Club.

These lads exploded with untimely mirth, and Diana flashed one of her brilliant and imperious glances at them.

"You didn't wait till I had finished," she said. "Women can beat men at sports which depend upon quickness and agility and skill rather than on brute strength."

"I'd sooner trust to brute strength!" shouted Sally, brandishing a paddle boat-hook which had lately become her favourite weapon in lieu of hockey- or golf-stick or croquet mallet. Sally could never be happy without some "besom of destruction," as Archie called it, in her hand, and her interpolation evoked another roar of laughter from the boys.

"Order, order!" cried Di's clear young voice, rising above

the clamour; but there was not much more order to be got out of that meeting, and it shortly broke up amid laughter and merry banter, some of the guests returning by water, others striking across footpaths in many divergent directions, the rest driving back in the conveyances which had brought them from more distant homes.

Stella had a very pretty little canoe of her own, given her by York, who was himself enjoying greatly a mode of locomotion which was easier to him than any other, and from which his many injuries did not seriously debar him.

Although his left arm was very weak, his right was strong, and by a little dexterous practice he was enabled to use the paddle with fair ease and success. Stella delighted to accompany him on his small voyages. He taught her the use of the paddle, and she relieved him whenever he was tired. The intimacy between the two had ripened rapidly, and Diana was fostering it all she could, in the good-natured hope that Stella would console herself for the loss of Rudolf Hastings as a lover in the attentions of her distant kinsman.

For Rudolf had paid two flying visits since the Vanboroughs arrived at Nun's Bower, and Diana was very well assured that his fancy—if ever he had really had one—for Stella Sinclair was a thing of the past. She found him an entertaining and exhilarating comrade. He was ambitious, and so was she; a note of common sympathy and interest was struck at once between them. His talk, brilliant and cultured, opened up new vistas for her, gave her glimpses into a seething world of which she knew almost nothing, but desired to know more. A man with prospects and aspirations like that to marry a little country parson's daughter without a penny! Absurd!—it would be ruination to his career! Fancy Stella in the world of politics, with the flood of party feeling surging round her, in a position where tact, *savoir faire*, diplomacy, and perhaps a little innocent intriguing would be invaluable—it was ridiculous

to think of such a thing! Probably Rudolf saw that for himself. Certainly it was not Stella at this juncture whom he sought out; his confidences were not poured into her ears. But each time that he went away Diana felt she knew him better, had advanced a step in intimacy, and was more vividly interested in his future, and in the drama of the political stage than she had ever been before.

But Stella knew nothing of this; for the fresh interest in her life had enabled her to put away the achings of regret which for a while had followed her decision with respect to Rudolf. She hoped she had done right; but it was not a matter upon which she could speak, even with her so-called uncle. And she found it answer best to think of it as little as possible.

As Stella piloted her canoe down stream towards home, York accompanying her, as he liked to do for a chat with her father, he chanced to put his hand beneath the cushions, and drew out a parcel from beneath. It was some exercise-books for the children, wrapped in paper, but the paper was covered with clever little pencil-sketches of the different boats and canoes and their occupants, dashed in with such a skilful touch, and so much vivid characterisation, that York exclaimed in surprise:

"My dear child! you never told me you had your mother's gift!"

Stella's face was crimson; she looked much taken back.

"Oh, I did not mean anybody to see. I only did them for lame little Phœbe. She got left out in the cold, somehow. She is not a pretty or taking child, and is just getting to the shy, gawky age, and fancies nobody cares for her. It amused her to see me draw, and she forgot her little troubles. But, indeed, I did not mean you to see."

"My dear, why not? It is a great gift. Look at that sketch of Miss Conquest—only a few strokes—and yet it tells so much! Stella, I think you see more than people give you credit for,"

She coloured hotly, for she knew what he meant. She had felt it almost ungenerous ; but she had not been able to help giving to her representation of Di just that suggestion of aggressiveness which the grace and beauty of the original deftly disguised. It was not caricature ; but one touch more and it would have been.

York looked long at the drawing, and laid it aside, glancing into Stella's face.

"You are hiding your light beneath a bushel, my dear. Some day you must tell me why."

CHAPTER XV

THE PHANTOM NUN

ARCHIE was looking squarely at her, a mixture of seriousness and banter in his eyes.

"A ghost—at Nun's Bower? No, I've never seen the glimpse of such a thing. I suppose it's the proper thing for an old house to have its traditional spook, but—"

"The odd thing about this one, though," interrupted Diana, "is that so far as I can gather it isn't a traditional spook at all. Tradition seems to have been lacking in imagination. Esther has told me that there are no ghostly traditions either about her house or yours. This spook is a purely modern arrival, or a revival of some dead-and-gone ghost of the past. But I tell you several people declare they have seen the gliding, shadowy figure, and there is a certain unanimity in their description of the apparition."

"Village bumpkins!" ejaculated Archie, with a good-natured contempt, "a fine story they make about nothing. One sees—and the rest think they do, and follow up the lead. Pouff!"

Diana had hesitated once or twice before speaking again; but after a pause she suddenly broke out:

"It isn't only the country bumpkins who have seen the thing, Archie, unless you count me as such. For I've seen it myself!"

"You!" cried Archie, in undisguised amazement; "well, that collars the crumpet and no mistake!"

"Until I heard of somebody else seeing it too, I scarcely

knew whether I believed in my own eyes," continued Diana. "For one thing, I never believed in ghosts; for another (if it isn't a bit of a bull), I never thought I was the right sort for seeing them, if they were there. When one hears of noises, one says 'rats.' When one hears of vague and ghostly happenings and misfortunes, one says 'drains.' When one hears of apparitions, one says 'liver.' That's been about my attitude of mind. I've said that last word to myself since my own experiences of ghost-seeing. But so far as I know, my liver's all right. And yet I believe I've seen the phantom nun on two distinct occasions, and each time within the precincts of Nun's Bower."

And led on by Archie's eager questions, she gave him the full account of the two times when she had believed herself either the victim of delusion or else the witness to some occult phenomenon.

"A nun, you say—the thing has that appearance, has it?"

"It certainly has that appearance. It has been very dark both times I have seen it; but the white coif round the head has been the most conspicuous thing about it. And the village bumpkins who profess to have seen it all say the same. It appears to be a woman clad in grey, with a white coif about the head; and coming from Nun's Bower, or being seen in those precincts, naturally one first thinks of a nun."

"You had not heard of a ghostly nun before you saw the figure?"

"No. And I have not spoken a syllable about it to anyone till now. I wasn't going to set any rumour afloat. I was a bit ashamed of having seen the spook-like thing myself. Archie, do you believe there are such things as ghosts?"

"Not much!" he answered, ruminating the while somewhat hard for him, "at least, you know, I've an open mind on the subject. One hears things one can't altogether pooh-pooh. But I believe a great deal more in some tomfoolery or trick,

when one hears of phantom nuns and so forth. I'd phantom them, if I could once lay hold on them !”

Archie looked almost savage, remembering a certain murderous knife-blade he had seen in York's hands not so very long ago. Could the two things have any connection?—the gliding figure of the coifed nun and that snake-like rustle amid the underwood, which York had heard just before he made his significant find? Sir Humphrey had sworn his friends to silence upon that incident for the present, and Archie's lips were sealed. But it flashed into his mind that the ghost and the knife might have some connection, and he spoke musingly.

“Do you think, Miss Conquest, it could be possible that there should be any sort of plot afoot in the village to get Sir Humphrey out of Nun's Bower again? Yes, I don't wonder you look surprised. But it's not an unheard-of thing for a house, left empty year after year, to become a place of very convenient resort for the bad characters of the place—or perhaps even those of some more distant locality. In old times one would have thought that perhaps smugglers from the coast might use it as a depositary for their goods; but in these days that seems scarcely probable, though one does hear of clever and organised smuggling still carried on where one would least expect it. A house such as ours presents a great variety of possibilities. No servants in the main building; a curious construction which enables an intruder to dodge about in a marvellous manner, and circle round and round in case of pursuit, escaping in a variety of ways. If anything illicit were going on in or near Cleethorpe—even the poaching which at some seasons of the year is a regular trade still—a house like this would be uncommonly handy, one can fancy; and it would disgust the gang who used it not a little to find it no longer available. Really, the notion of getting up a ghost” (“and a dangerous one, too,” he added mentally, though he did not speak these words aloud) “to try and scare the legal intruder away, would be rather a brilliant one, and has been

known to do the trick before now. I declare I believe we are on the right scent after all!"

Diana's face had flushed hotly.

"I hate model villages," she cried, "if this Cleethorpe is a specimen! A little cockered-up place, run by the parson's daughter!—chock full of the latest crazes in the way of councils and guilds and associations and all the tommy-rot you can think of. And at heart just as bad as it can be! Hear the Squire on the subject! Oh, it's enough to make me turn high Tory! And when they get a man here like Sir Humphrey, to try and scare him away by their pettifogging little trumpery tricks! I'd like to ghost them, I would!"

Archie laughed at her sudden vehemence.

"Well, if that's the game, they might know (if they knew anything of their man) that it was foreordained to failure. The boss will stay in his own house just as long as it suits him, and will not budge an inch for any sort of silly intimidation. But you need not be quite so down on Cleethorpe, Di." Archie sometimes let this name slip from him when the two were alone together, and had never been rebuked. The girl liked him, and was quite ready to admit him to terms of brotherly intimacy. He was utterly and entirely her slave, and she knew it, and did not trouble to assert her authority. "I think it's almost more likely that the offenders come farther afield than just the village. But I mean to keep eyes and ears open. They may have accomplices in the place who are spreading rumours. Perhaps things are not moving fast enough for them. You saw this apparition, it seems, more than two months ago, before we arrived on the scene at all. It may be they are disappointed at results, and want to set rumour flying, hoping to create a scare of some sort. There is no knowing."

Diana's eyes were glowing with a curious mixture of emotions.

"Oh, if that's the game, let us all help to play it for them!"

she cried. "If they want ghosts, let 'em have them, by all means! If they want to scare other folks, let us get up a good scare for them. I'll play ghost for Cleethorpe. I've had half a mind to do it before. If it's a case of tit-for-tat, I'm doubly ready. If they want to scare us, we'll show them that it's a game that two can play at. Phantom nun! Well, they shall have one, and my bogey shall be a long sight better than anything they've thought of themselves!"

Where Diana was concerned, Archie was blind to every consideration save to do her will. Whatever mad-cap project she evolved, he was ready to carry out with faithful docility. Moreover, this particular idea rather appealed to him. He was decidedly puzzled by sundry small things which had transpired of late. York, who was a bad sleeper, and often passed wakeful nights, when pain kept his senses on the stretch, had more than once spoken of his conviction as to the presence of some stealthy presence in the house; but owing to his slowness of movement, he was never able to dash out upon the intruder, and had never caught a glimpse of anything as yet. Sir Humphrey had spoken occasionally of a curious sensation of not being alone, particularly in the long drawing-room, where Diana had experienced a precisely similar feeling. Archie had not infrequently kept watch and vigil, trying to surprise and dodge the intruder; but hitherto without any success. The creature either did not chance to put in an appearance that night, or had some inkling of his presence, and made off. He was more and more disposed to suspect trickery in the matter, and was rather chagrined that rustic delinquents should have so far outwitted him.

He could not believe the matter more serious than some plot to get rid of the owner of Nun's Bower before the autumn should set in. Sir Humphrey himself had spoken of poachers, and that seemed the most likely supposition. Ignorant men were generally superstitious. It might be that to create a counter scare as regards Nun's Bower might have a salutary

effect. Archie had an inner consciousness that if he were to speak to his kinsman on the subject, the proposed plan would be instantly vetoed. But his chiefest desire was to please Diana Conquest; the girl was eagerly resolved upon her madcap prank, and Archie was determined at all costs to aid and abet.

It was not difficult to satisfy her wishes. Just at this juncture there was practically no moon. The nights were still and dim, never too dark for the due carrying out of the project, but dark enough to give sufficient cover to conspirators, and to facilitate their movements.

Just at this time strange whispers were going abroad, confined for the most part to the village itself, but carried by the servants into some of the larger houses, that a ghostly figure was not infrequently to be seen gliding up the avenue towards Nun's Bower, or through the dense shrubberies which surrounded it. The postboy, coming up with a belated letter, or telegram, had seen the apparition more than once. Billy Blake, the odd job lad, employed by pretty well every house in turn, told the same tale. A woman on her way to Convent House at night to ask aid of Miss Lynne in a moment of emergency had been terribly scared by the sight of the phantom nun. They all called it that; for the chiefest thing about it was the white coif round the head, which all swore to. What the rest of the dim and shadowy figure looked like none could rightly say; but all could testify to the white folds about the head, and the dim darkness of the shrouded face.

It was with something like a sympathetic start that Archie, in the dim recesses of the boat-house, lighted only by the phosphorescent gleam of the phantom craft he had so carefully prepared, saw stealing in upon him the gliding phantom figure with the white folds of linen round the head. His start was noted by his accomplice as she approached, and Di's silvery laugh, muffled and subdued, set his heart beating to a different tune.

"You are delightful, Archie! What a real ghost-boat you have got for me; it will just attract attention, and light up my ghostliness without betraying too much. You are a capital boy, and you can come along with me for a little way; but you must not betray yourself or me. I bet you anything you like nobody will dare approach to investigate matters! I shall just be sighted by a few belated stragglers, and seen from a few cottage windows looking on to the water. I shall set tongues wagging, or it wouldn't be Cleethorpe. And if any of the real ghost-makers are abroad, on mischief or anything else, we'll pay them out in their own coin."

"And you want me back here to remove all traces on your return?" he said; "I wish you'd have let me come with you as a phantom boatman."

"Oh, no; that would have spoiled the whole show. The nun would never be attended like that. We must keep up appearances, or we shall upset the apple-cart. Now, Archie, just help me in, and arrange my ghostly robes properly. Follow me down to the bridge, but then come back here and wait for me. If you go too far you'll be seen, and that would give us away at once."

A minute later, and forth from the boat-house there crept a faintly-luminous craft, looking more like some gigantic shell than a boat, as it floated softly down the stream. That it could be steered, and even propelled noiselessly against the current was obvious to anyone critically watching its course; but the almost motionless figure seated in it appeared to be borne along without any effort or act of her own. Archie covered his mouth with his hand to keep back the chuckling laugh which well-nigh broke from him. The phosphorescent light illumined the ghost-like motionless figure, the faint light seeming to concentrate itself upon the white coif, leaving the face in deepest shadow, so that the ghastly effect was almost produced of there being no face at all—only a blank, featureless mask. Soft-falling grey robes fell ghost-like

about the figure, and the whole effect was unearthly in the extreme.

Archie, choking with suppressed laughter, cautiously followed the course of the little craft till it had reached the bridge, beneath which it glided forth into the wider waters of the Clee. He saw that the girl was able to manage it with perfect ease, and without any apparent motion. He had been at some pains to arrange an unseen propeller which one so well used as Diana to aquatic manœuvres could manipulate with the minimum of motion. The phantom nun looked as though carved out of stone—so rigid and motionless was her pose. Archie watched the boat round the bend of the stream, and permitted himself the luxury of a faint guffaw.

"Well, I only hope that some of those chaps are on the look-out to-night! A regular case of the biter bit, I should say. I wish she'd have let me go with her; not but what she's as right as a house. Nobody in this blessed little hole of a place would dare tackle a thing like that! But it'll set tongues wagging, and no mistake; and if it doesn't scare the real ghosts, maybe it will make them suspect that their trick is discovered, and that they'd best lie low for a spell."

Archie had crossed the stream by the bridge, and after retracing his steps and entering the precincts of Convent House, did not immediately return to the boat-house, but sauntered along beside the fish-ponds till he found himself at the entrance to the long yew walk, which ran down almost to the water's edge. He had just set his foot within this, when suddenly he gave a great start, and exclaimed beneath his breath:

"Holy Moses! there's the other of them!"

For he was certain he had seen something white, at a considerable distance from the ground, flitting ghost-like up the avenue. Nothing but the white spot was visible to him; but instantly he was certain that it must be the coifed head of the phantom nun, and gave chase with a silent impetuosity

which took him over the soft turf at a high rate of speed. Again he caught sight of the white coif, this time perceptibly nearer, and made a dash towards it. Archie was a trained athlete. He was pretty certain no rustic encumbered by drapery had a chance against him. The white spot seemed to be stationary for a moment, as though its wearer had just heard the sound of pursuit. Then it moved, glided onwards rapidly, with a sinuous, scarcely-perceptible motion that was quite foreign to the young fellow's preconceived ideas of the run of a village lad or yokel. But he was too hot in pursuit to give over-much heed to the character of the movements of the quarry. That came to his mind later. For the present he was engrossed in catching up with the figure, whose long dim garments were becoming faintly visible to him in the grey dusk of the midsummer night.

He had flung away all secrecy of movement; he was pursuing now fiercely and at top speed. The hunted phantom was gliding before him with a swiftness that was astonishing; but still Archie gained upon it. It seemed aware of this, and suddenly deflecting its direction, plunged into the tangled shrubberies, intersected by many half-overgrown paths, glided down one of these, the twigs making marvellously little sound as the thing dived through them—not half the noise Archie was conscious of making himself. The boughs and tangled undergrowth bothered him a good deal more than it seemed to bother the quarry; still he saw the white coif before him, till it suddenly seemed to dip and vanish. He supposed at the first that it was merely hidden from view by a sharp turn in the path or some fresh tangle of undergrowth. But it certainly had seemed to fall earthwards and disappear in a mound covered by rough grass and stones, where he came himself to a sudden stop, half falling over the impediment in the path. When he rose again and listened attentively, not a sound could he hear. The night wind just whispered in the trees overhead, the owls hooted in greeting

or challenge; but not a sound suggestive of human proximity fell upon his strained senses. Not a glimmer of white could he see before him, though now the view lay less impeded to his gaze; for he had approached that little stream which formed the boundary of Sir Humphrey's property, and widened out into the pool which he made his bathing-place.

"Done, by jingo!" cried Archie, chagrined; "I did think I'd got the fellow into a tight place that time! I'm not often outrun, and I don't believe in melting into thin air. But where in thunder could the creature have got to? I should have heard a splash if water had been touched, and short of that there's no way of escape that I can think of!"

He stood looking about him. He kicked the stones beneath his feet, as though they were in some way in collusion with the phantom, and at last, with a muttered "Well, I'm jiggered!" he walked back in the direction of his rendezvous with Diana, more perplexed than he had been for a considerable time.

"It's a stupid bit of business; but it's devilish clever," he remarked to himself, and with the memory of that gleaming knife before him, he concluded it might be devilish in more ways than one. "I'd give a good deal to unravel the tangle—I would, indeed. Don't think this prank of Diana's is going to work the oracle much. I incline to believe there's a cleverer head or hand in it than she's begun to think so far. I wonder what the boss makes of it. He's so dead quiet, you never know. I don't know whether Di will tell him of her escapade, or what he would think of it. I'm afraid we shan't read the riddle that way."

Di returned in great spirits from her ghostly voyage. She had been just sufficiently seen to satisfy her, and she had produced an effect quite to her own liking.

"I don't think any villagers will come here playing ghosts in a hurry," she remarked. "I fancy they've had a taste of their own brew which will last them a long while. I got out at the churchyard, and did a bit of a glide round the graves

there. The sexton's wife saw me at it. I'm not sure you won't hear her shrieking still if you listen hard enough. I took to my skiff then, and came back. We shall hear a fine tale to-morrow morning, you bet ! ”

“ And, meantime, I've been having a ghost hunt on my own account,” said Archie, feeling that it would be mean to keep his own adventure to himself. “ The rival nun was out to-night, and I sighted her, and gave chase. But she escaped me, and apparently vanished into thin air ; where he, she, or it got to I can't imagine. I'm going to hunt that shrubbery out to-morrow by daylight. But she bested me that time, and no mistake. If I did believe in real live spooks, I should say I'd seen one to-night ! ”

“ A good many people will be saying that to-morrow ! ” laughed Di, who was elated with excitement of her adventure ; “ but really your adventure is quite exciting, Archie. I must get home now, or Esther may discover my absence, and be in a pucker ; but I'll come and hunt with you to-morrow. I'm quite determined to get to the bottom of the matter. It would be too ridiculous if it were to baulk the whole lot of us ! ”

She disappeared laughingly in the direction of the house, and Archie, looking after her, stroked his face, and said :

“ I wonder if this is going to be another case of—‘ There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamed of in our philosophy ! ’ ”

CHAPTER XVI

ON CONQUEST BENT

DIANA'S eyes were wide with amaze. Really, this was a new experience. She scarcely believed her ears when first it dawned upon her that Colonel York was actually daring to take her to task, to blame her, to criticise her actions! Yet there was no mistaking the clear and terse import of his words. True, she had provoked the attack by herself leading up to the subject, and giving a graphic account of the "scare" she had inflicted a few nights before upon Cleethorpe, with which the place was ringing yet; but that this silent soldier, with whom, in spite of constant meetings, she had scarcely ever really conversed or exchanged opinions, should actually dare to criticise her to her face was a startling novelty. It arrested her attention. It set her studying him as she had never thought it worth while to do before. And more than this, it opened her eyes to a certain fact to which she had hitherto remained blind, and she found herself observing York, and appraising him in a fashion she had never thought of doing heretofore; whilst the conclusion she reached in her headlong method was summed up in a few brief phrases which she formulated to herself.

"Really, he is a distinguished-looking man. I had no idea he would ever be so handsome. He was such a scarecrow when he came; but how wonderfully he has improved! He's rather interesting, too. I declare he's much too good for Stella. Stella is a namby-pamby—a good little soul, but tiresome. She wants a tame curate for a husband. A man

like that would be thrown away upon her ; she'd drive him silly with her little finikin ways. Really, I believe I'll cultivate him myself. It's most improving to hear him pull my character to pieces like that."

A sparkle crept into Diana's eyes. She looked exceedingly attractive that sunny morning, as she stood in a picturesque pose in the prow of the gondola, into which she had invited Colonel York to step, promising him a "lift," as she phrased it, down to the Rectory, whither he was bent. She was in her club white and red, the vivid colour in her cheeks contrasted with the peculiar fairness of her skin producing a somewhat dazzling effect. The golden gleam which had leaped into her eyes bespoke a certain stress of feeling, and she was conscious of experiencing one of those quick thrills of emotion which stimulated and excited her long before she traced them to their source.

She had once told Esther that she could not endure to be criticised or found fault with. This was true ; but her rebellion against such criticism was apt to take different forms. When it aroused scorn and anger she generally had her flash out—and then, in her own phrase, "made tracks." To-day, however, she had no disposition to follow out that line of action. Her mentor was a man—that was in itself a thing unique ; and a well-looking man to boot—which made the experience more piquant. She found herself aroused and interested rather than annoyed. And beneath the surface surprise and amusement lay another dawning sentiment—this man must be conquered ; he must not escape her sway. If she in measure felt his power, he must be made to feel hers. Hitherto she had scarcely given him a thought ; now she found herself regarding him with considerable interest, and telling herself that she had been decidedly blind ; or else that the past two months had wrought a very great change in Donald York.

Both these things were true. York's improvement in health had been gradual and imperceptible, but it was none

the less steady and real. The voyage home had been beneficial, and this quiet, restful life in surroundings so pleasant, and through a delightful English summer, had brought a measure of healing and recuperative power which was gradually making a new man of the battered soldier. Physically he would never be much "good" again; he would never walk rapidly, or be able to do many things which others could without a thought. But he was losing that weary sense of exhaustion and that constant, wearing, neuralgic pain, which for so long had sapped away such energy and vitality as remained to him, and made life too often nothing but a burden. As a natural outcome of this improved state of things he had slowly lost the drawn and cadaverous aspect which had made him something of a death's-head on his first landing. He was very gradually putting on flesh, and beneath the ingrained bronze of his long exposure to tropical climate a healthier tint was beginning to replace the almost livid pallor which had been painfully apparent before. In fact, York might in time recover some measure of those good looks which had once caused him to be called the handsomest man in his regiment, though he would never recover more than a measure of that vigour and strength which his own courage and gallantry had been the cause of his losing.

To-day, for the first time, it dawned upon Diana that this change was going on, and that she had too quickly ruled York out of her life and her thoughts. She paused now, as they glided out of the chain of fish-ponds into the shady windings of the river, and she looked at him from beneath the golden-brown fringe of her long lashes, and said, with a tentative little smile:

"I think you have been hearing tales from Stella. Stella does not like me. I am not good enough for her."

Diana spoke with that admirable frankness which was too characteristic of her to excite wonder or embarrassment. York's grave gaze met hers squarely as he made answer;

"Of course Stella has felt vexed about it. Mrs. Gregson was made quite ill with the fright, and one small child who saw the phantom boat on the river had a fit of something approaching convulsions. It set the whole place talking, and then the truth came out. I do not think it can have been very pleasant for Miss Lynne, either. That sort of exploit cannot often be carried through without unpleasant after-results."

Diana laughed a little recklessly.

"Oh, Esther is very good. She understands me—nobody else does. Of course, I got a little scolding, but that was all right. I daresay I deserved it. But when I told Esther I had a reason for what I did, that it wasn't just an escapade without any *raison d'être* for it, she believed me. I suppose you wouldn't!"

Diana's glance at York was half defiant, half appealing, and wholly bewitching. His grave face slightly relaxed as he made answer:

"Pray do not think that I arrogate to myself the place of your judge, Miss Conquest. That would be a grave impertinence on my part. You began the subject, and challenged my opinion. I gave it you. And I may add that I have a private grievance of my own in this matter, but that, of course, you did not know."

Diana's eyes kindled. She leaned forward eagerly.

"I wish you would tell me," she said; "you know that I have myself seen the other ghost—the real phantom nun—whom I tried to personate the other night, hoping by that means to scare off the other intruder, who would be certain to hear of my impersonation. That was what I really wanted to do; only, having had to own up, so that these precious scared folks may be able to sleep in their beds in peace again, has just gone and spoiled the whole show."

"So that was your motive, was it, Miss Conquest? Well, I see your point. But I particularly did not want that first ghost scared away. I was setting my traps to try and corner

him—or her—or it. And now I am afraid you may have frightened it away for a spell. Whoever it is that comes—short of a real apparition, which theory I shall not too readily accept—comes with some deliberate purpose, and a purpose which I fear is malevolent and inimical to Sir Humphrey. As an idle man, whose eyes and ears are the only things he has of much value to himself or others at present, I have been keeping close watch and ward since my suspicions were first aroused. I have been laying my own plans, and this mid-summer weather with its short, light nights was all in my favour. If, as I fear, your action may result in the temporary withdrawal of the unseen foe, things may become more difficult. The crisis will be postponed and my chances of capture lessened. That is the private crow I have to pluck with you, Miss Conquest. But I absolve you from any knowledge that your action would be in any wise harmful to Sir Humphrey Vanborough.”

Diana’s eyes were dilated with wonder. Archie had indeed spoken about some possible poacher conspiracy, but York looked more grave and serious than she thought this theory warranted, and she felt her pulses stirred to quickened interest. She leaned towards him, her breath coming thick and fast, the blood tingling in her veins.

“Danger—to Sir Humphrey! Oh, Colonel York, what do you mean? Not real danger? Only some silly trickery that he would laugh to scorn. As though he would be scared away by village yokels!”

“For my part, I do not believe in the village yokel theory. I am afraid that it is a more serious matter; but I have not one shred of evidence, and for the present Sir Humphrey is not disposed to accept my theory, though I did propound it.”

“Tell me what it is!” cried Di, her face quivering. “You don’t know how I respect and admire Sir Humphrey Vanborough! If you are doing anything for him—do let me help you if I can!”

He smiled at her eagerness ; but he did not explain his words altogether, though Di's quick wits were able to fill up some of the blanks.

"I do not think Sir Humphrey would wish my very vague suspicions talked about. But we have both lived long in India. We have seen strange things there—and heard stranger. I remember once being associated a good deal with a native soldier—a capital fellow in his way. He applied once, rather suddenly, for leave of absence and got it. He was away a month, and came back and went to work as quietly as ever. Some while after, we chanced to be camping out together, and I asked him about his sudden journey and its object. I knew he had had an object. Then he told me the story—a regular case of vendetta, as we call it in Europe. It was just a case of the old blood feud. It was his duty to do some killing, and he had quietly gone and done it. The strange, almost ghastly persistency of this sort of thing is its chiefest peril and mystery. It is not blind rage that actuates the avenger, nor even a personal enmity, which might be combatted. It is an act of faith, a part of his religion, as you say. Blood has to be shed, and he is set apart as the instrument. It may be a long job, or it may be quickly accomplished. But done it must be, and by his hand. He will bide his time with a patience that is almost appalling ; but one day he will strike—and strike hard."

Diana's rich colour had slowly paled.

"You don't mean to say that anybody hates Sir Humphrey, and is pursuing him in that awful fashion?" she cried, almost fiercely.

"I have no reason for suspecting anything so serious," he answered. "What I do suspect, however, is that he has been followed from India for some reason or other. He was instrumental not very long before he left in breaking up a very dangerous conspiracy, and in bringing to condemnation and death some of its chiefest members. Very shortly before we

left for England his faithful and attached native servant died suddenly. I always thought the man had been poisoned, and he believed the same. I saw him just before his death, and he tried to convey a warning to me. What it was I did not rightly catch; but I believe it referred to some sort of vengeance to be wreaked upon Sir Humphrey; though it was not for a long while that I suspected the vengeance would follow him out of the country and over here. There, Miss Conquest, you have wormed out of me a great deal more than I meant to tell you—more than Archie knows; almost more than I confided to Vanborough himself when we discussed this thing. I trust you to keep this confidence to yourself. You will not fail me, will you?"

She held out her hand suddenly; her face was very earnest.

"Indeed, indeed, I will not. I thank you for trusting me; you shall never have cause to regret it. And if ever I can help you in any way whatever, my services are yours to command. May we not be friends in this? You know how I care for Esther Lynne. I think you know something of her story. If it were only for her sake, I would almost give my life to shield Sir Humphrey Vanborough from harm!"

Her eager face was all aglow with the enthusiasm which possessed her. York took the young, strong hand, and held it for a moment. He had not hitherto been so much attracted towards Diana Conquest as others habitually were. But to-day some new element had made itself felt in his intercourse with her. He did not seek to explain this; but he accepted it and took pleasure in it.

From that day forward a slight but unmistakable change asserted itself in his relations with the ladies of Convent House. Sometimes before this he had wondered whether he were not somewhat *de trop* during the pleasant evenings spent there; but now he never felt it.

Diana suddenly made the discovery that he was possessed

of a voice. That he loved music she had always known, without giving it a thought. Now she took delight in making him show what he could do himself. He was no longer suffered to be a silent listener. Her own flute-like soprano and Archie's light tenor had often been heard together with advantage. Now York's deep and melodious baritone formed a new element, and sometimes Esther would be pressed into the service to provide the contralto, though she would laughingly say she was too old to sing now, and bid them ask Stella to take her place.

Sometimes Stella did come, York fetching her in the canoe, and taking her back when the evening was wearing away. He thought it good for Stella to be brought into more direct contact with the young life of the place. He had encouraged her to join the aquatic club, and had fairly laughed away her scruples lest giving a few hours weekly to a healthy out-door recreation might be a waste of time, or an indulgence which it was not right to permit herself. Stella was looking somewhat brighter and less pensive for the new elements which had come into her life of late; and the feeling that her so-called uncle was really in sympathy with her, and her own undisputed property (after a fashion of speaking) was a source of keen pleasure to her. She had not liked to own it, even to herself, but it had given her real satisfaction to note how little the soldier seemed fascinated by Diana Conquest, who took most people more or less by storm. She had never suggested to him that she herself neither quite liked nor quite trusted the brilliant girl who had made herself such a power in the place. But York was far too keen an observer not to be well aware of the faint and indefinable hostility between the pair, and to watch it with some attention.

"Don't let her take you from me, Uncle Don!" Stella once burst out, with a sudden and most unwonted vehemence, as the two slid down the stream one moonlit evening, after a pleasant little musical gathering at Convent House.

"My dear child, what do you mean?" he answered.

"Don't you know what I mean? I should have thought everybody must have seen it. She gets them all to be her slaves, even Sir Humphrey—quite an old man! Can't you see how she tries to fascinate him, how he can't help watching her, making much of her, spoiling her in every way? Archie Vanborough is just over head and ears in love with her, and she plays with him like a cat with a mouse! She will never give two thoughts to him, but she makes him think she is quite fond of him. It's the same with all the boys at the club! Oh, I know it sounds horrid to say it; but watch, and you'll see it's true."

"True in a sense, Stella; but you are a little jaundiced from your ignorance of life. If you had seen more of the world you would know that what seems a really serious flirtation perhaps to you (for want of a better word) is nothing but the small change that passes as current coin amongst young people in a more gay and fashionable world than yours. They all know the game, and play it with more or less of energy. Miss Conquest has that gift of fascination which is quite indescribable, though we all feel it. She knows it, and we all know it, and those boys ought to be able to take care of themselves. There are plenty of them—safety lies in numbers. As for Archie, as I have seen him equally desperately in love two or three times already within the compass of a few months, I think you need not feel seriously disturbed on his account."

"I shan't care for anything if you won't let her get you away, Uncle Don!" cried Stella; "but she is setting her cap at you now. Oh, I know that is not a pretty way of putting it. But don't be vexed with me; I can see it, and I know what that is like when it happens. She is so beautiful, and so clever and quick, and one cannot help listening and watching whether one wants to or not. And then, somehow the mischief is done—you can't tell how, and things are never the same again."

Stella's face was in shadow ; but there was a sound as of tears in her voice, and a bitterness which was foreign to the habitual gentleness of her disposition. York had suspected before this that Stella's life held a hidden trouble, and it was not very long after this little episode upon the water that he obtained an unexpected confirmation as to his suspicions.

Rudolf had come home, and they were all dining at Bishop's Hall—a friendly little gathering of the immediate neighbours. The dinner had gone off merrily. Music had followed. Geraldine Hastings, the delicate girl seldom seen outside the walls of home, had charmed them all by her sweet singing, and Rudolf had a good voice which had been well trained. Sally had manoeuvred that Stella should play some of his accompaniments, as she had always done in old days. The girl had a sympathetic touch, and if not a great musician, had the gift of subordinating herself to the singer, and following his lead. A few wrong notes she might perpetrate, nor was she very quick at reading at sight ; but she had always been Rudolf's accompanist in old days, and Sally was desirous of seeing the old ways revived.

But suddenly Diana swooped down upon them. Stella was bungling a little over a catchy modern accompaniment she had never seen before. She was swept from the stool by the impetuous young enthusiast, and Diana's clear, incisive grasp of the phrasing brought a smile of approval to Rudolf's rather clouded face.

Sally was lounging in an easy and ungraceful attitude on the sofa, the other end of which was occupied by Colonel York. He and she were on very friendly terms. She loved to draw him out about the life he had led, and the things he had seen and done. Possibly she had a clearer idea than anyone else in the company what his adventurous and chequered career had been like. This had engendered a certain pleasant intimacy between them, and as they occupied a distant corner

of the room, beside an open window, there was no danger of their being overheard in other quarters.

"There!" exclaimed Sally, "that was just what I was afraid of!"

"What?" asked York, rousing up and looking round.

"Why, I wanted Stella to have a good time. And I wanted Rudolf to appreciate her as he used to do once. She is a dear little soul, with all her little cranks and fads. If he could only cure her of a few of those, she would be just the right wife for him, whatever the mater may think. Rudolf must have somebody who admires him, and it would be better for him to marry somebody with rather tight and scrupulous ideas. I can say that to you, Colonel York, because you don't laugh at me as other people do. I don't want Rudolf to marry a gay, ambitious society woman. He's got enough ambition himself for one *ménage*. He wants a wife to love and admire him, but who will use the brake rather than the whip. I've always wanted it to be Stella, and once I thought it would."

York looked roused and interested. He remembered a very faint suspicion which had entered his own head when Rudolf had first spoken of Stella. He looked across the room at the slim, white-clad figure, standing now somewhat pensively apart with Geraldine, seemingly turning over music with her, but covertly watching the pair at the piano. Diana occupied the stool, Rudolf standing beside her. She was striking chords and playing phrases, and he was watching her animated face and strong, long fingers wandering over the keys. When he began to sing there was a curious intensity in his voice. The theme was an animated one—love and war combined, and he sang and she played as though one spirit animated them.

"You see how it is," Sally's voice at his elbow continued; "it has been so almost from the beginning. Stella doesn't seem to get a look-in when Di is there. I can understand it, can't you? When Di makes a set at me for anything, she just sweeps me up—I'd go to the world's end with her or for her.

But afterwards one wonders a bit how she does it. I've known her a goodish spell now, and we're quite great friends as things go ; but I haven't a notion whether she cares a red cent for me, nor whether, if she chose to take herself off to the ends of the earth suddenly, she'd ever give me so much as a thought again ! ”

York was a better listener than talker ; he made an expressive gesture, but spoke no word.

“ Now Stella, with all her little cranks and crazes, is staunch all through. When you've got her, you've got her. She'll never go back on you. That's why I want her for Rudolf. She'd make him happier than a more brilliant woman—I'm quite sure of that. But something has come between them, and how it'll end, goodness knows ! ”

And Sally got up and lounged out through the window, leaving York to his own meditations and observations.

CHAPTER XVII

RUDOLF THE DIPLOMAT

"BE on our side, Rudolf, be on our side!" cried Sally, capering wildly, her boat-hook brandished with a dangerous energy, which caused him to take a backward step, whilst Diana firmly wrenched it from Sally's reluctant hands, and threw it back into the boat they had just quitted. "If you'll only fight our battle with the governor—I mean with dad," seeing the little crease which showed between Rudolf's eyes, "I'm sure we should get him over. Di can generally turn him round her little finger; but he's a bit stubborn over this. Be on our side—there's a beamish boy! Dad always listens to what you've got to say."

"Of course he will be on our side, Sally," spoke Diana, with her queenly assurance, as she turned her brilliant glance upon Rudolf. "What is he our captain and coach for, if not to be our champion, too? What do you think of your crew, sir, after your fortnight of serious coaching? Do we not do you credit? And shall we not bring you fame and kudos in a wider sphere?"

For Rudolf, since his return, had thrown himself with much zest and energy into the water pastimes which he found in full swing. In his Oxford days he had been stroke of his college eight for some while, and had come near to being numbered amongst the 'Varsity Blues, though never having actually attained that distinction. He was, however, an excellent oar, and extremely deft and clever with the paddle or any other propeller. Finding the girls full of eager enthusiasm

over their practice in a light little, out-rigged four-oar, which Sir Humphrey had presented to the club, he had constituted himself their coach, and had run or ridden or cycled along the riverside path almost daily, inculcating instruction, and striving to accustom his crew to a longer, a stronger, a more rhythmical stroke, and to throw their weight upon the oar instead of contenting themselves with mere arm-rowing, such as is common with girls ; and so quick had Diana and Sally been to assimilate his instructions, that already an immense advance had been made in speed and appearance, and the girls were eagerly conscious of their advance in proficiency, and growing in ambition and the desire to excel.

And now, when something had really been attained, and Rudolf had been more satisfied and complimentary than he had permitted himself to be at first (Diana had liked him all the better for his candid criticisms and sharp rebukes at the commencement of the practice), they broached for the first time the subject which had been engrossing them more or less through the summer, and which now must be decided quickly one way or the other.

Sally broke out before Rudolf could frame his question.

"The regatta, Rudolf, the regatta ! You know all about it ! At Cleeport—the August regatta. It is coming quite near now. And there's one race open for women—a four-oar, you know. And the Cleeport girls, who have a sort of a club, and boat a good bit, are going in, and they have almost challenged us since we started our club. They awfully want us to enter, and we are dying to. They think they will lick us into fits, and we think we can knock spots out of them. And we're just dying to have it out with them ; but dad—you know what he is—"

"He is perfectly fascinating—a real treasure of a Squire !" broke in Diana, in her imperious way. "I won't have a word spoken against such a delightful survival as your father, Sally !" She turned to Rudolf with her indescribable air of *camaraderie*

and good fellowship, a laugh in her eyes, an arch smile upon her lips, and she finished her speech to him. "Sally does not know what she possesses in such a father. She doesn't understand that if he were not what he is, Cleethorpe would be spoiled out of knowledge in about two two's; I'll back the Squire all I know—even if we do have to put up with a bit of a disappointment now and again. But if you'll take our part in this one thing, I believe amongst us we might square him, and even induce him to take an interest and a pride in our performance."

Rudolf began to understand.

"You girls want to enter your four-oar for this regatta, and my father is against it? Is that so?"

"Yes," cried Sally; "he says he won't have daughters of his making themselves a show to be stared at by all the bounders and clodhoppers of the neighbourhood, and the rowdy riff-raff of Cleeport. You just know the sort of thing he would say, Rudolf! And it's no use trying to get a word in edgeways when he's off on his high-horse like that. He won't let us have a regatta of our own as we intended—though we may have a water-party sometimes if we like, and have games and races amongst ourselves, and so on. But that's all so amateurish. We want to enter for the regatta. Do be on our side, there's a darling boy! Diana wants it as much as anybody—don't you, Di?"

"Of course I do. I'm very proud of my four, and Mr. Hastings is such a diplomat, as well as such a boating enthusiast, that he is going to fight our battle for us with the Squire. You will be able to explain to him that things are not quite as he thinks, and that we shall not sink to the level of pugilists and prize-fighters by entering ourselves for the 'ladies' race at the Cleeport Regatta. It really is to be for ladies—not fishwives, as in some places. A crew is coming over from Stillwater—one of Lord Greystone's daughters is captain and stroke, and the Cleeport girls, all of them come

from the same sort of homes as our own. They have two crews, and they are set on our competing against them. There is a nice little local rivalry, and if we don't come up to the scratch they will think it is because we are afraid of being beaten."

"Oh, we must go, we must go!" cried Sally, in an agony of emulation. "I know we shall beat them. We were every bit as good as they before—I've been over to watch them surreptitiously, and they're none such great shakes. And now that we've got on so with your coaching, Rudolf, why, we should just walk away from them! It'll be pretty well a row over for us! Oh, it would be a shame not to enter!"

"Keep your hair on, Sally," said Rudolf good-humouredly. "I'll have a talk with the powers that be, and see if the objections can be overcome. Mind you, I've a certain sort of sympathy with my father's view of the case—"

"So have I," suddenly spoke Diana. "And if we could hold back the pace of the world a bit, I'd really not mind much. But we can't, and it's precious little good trying; and it only leaves us stranded to try too much. That's how I feel about things. I must be in the swim. The water may be a bit turbid and foul, but I can't stand the feeling of being out of the current; I want the feeling of the great flood of life all about and round me, bearing me along—never mind exactly where, so long as one is on the crest of the wave. Do you know what I mean?"

For Rudolf's eyes had flashed back an expressive appreciation; and now he spoke in a strangely earnest way:

"Do I know? Do I not know, indeed! You have just voiced the innermost thought of my heart, Miss Conquest. Are you going home? Let me see you to the house—I want to pay Miss Lynne a visit; I always feel that I get ideas by exchanging them with her. Do you know she is a very remarkable woman, though so quiet and unassuming. I sometimes feel that had her lot been differently cast, she

might have been a power in a very different world from this."

"Can women be a power in the great world of—of—well, politics and diplomacy?" asked Diana eagerly, as they pursued their way together through the shrubberies and towards the house, leaving Sally to take her own way home as she would, by water or land.

"I should think she could!" answered Rudolf instantly, flashing a rather curious glance at the girl beside him, so regal in her air, so instinct with vitality, beauty, and individuality. "I often think that a clever and tactful and observant woman, well-informed, and with the facilities for knowing something of the under-currents of party strife, might be an immense power, and make herself something of a society queen. But so often women's energies and ambitions go to other and more trivial ends, and the chance is lost."

"Tell me more what you mean," spoke Di, with a touch of imperiousness in her voice.

Rudolf, nothing loath, obeyed. He spoke well, with trenchant, telling phrase and apt illustration. The world of politics and of diplomacy had its grip upon him. He was in the heart of the strife, and he knew much of men and things, and could throw illuminating side-lights on half the subjects which were stirring the minds of thinkers. Diana was not a student of any of these things, but she read the paper in a deep, rapid, and intelligent way, and discussed matters with Esther more at leisure. She had quick intuitions, and was swift to grasp the leading points in an argument, and extract the kernel of the problem. She was never afraid of asking a question which might show ignorance, or of betraying her ignorance where she did not know. Her felicitous questions struck Rudolf to-day, as they had struck him many times before. She seemed to go straight to the crux of the matter, whatever it might be, and sweep aside any tangle of sophistry with an unconscious acumen which delighted him.

He stayed somewhat long at Convent House that day, talking with aunt and niece. They sat in the shady, cloistered garden, and Diana moved hither and thither sometimes, unable for too long to remain stationary; and it seemed to him as though the sunshine followed her about as she moved, whilst the very birds of the air knew and loved her, and at her call would circle and wheel around her as she stood scattering grain, many of the bolder ones perching upon her hands or head or shoulder, and taking it from her fingers or lips.

She was like the very embodiment of summer, in her exuberant vitality and radiant beauty. When he was gone, Esther sat looking thoughtfully before her for some while, till Diana came skimming towards her, and with her graceful abandonment of movement, flung herself along the ground at her feet.

“Well, Esther, and what do you make of him?”

“I always think that Rudolf Hastings will make his mark in the world. I have thought it since he was a boy.”

“Yes, a mark; but what sort of a mark? Will it be a real big splash that will make the world stare at him, and his name known in a widening circle? Or will it just be the mark of the useful party man, who can be trusted to do good work; but who never gets up to the top of the ladder?”

“Ah, Di—who can read the future to that extent?”

“Ah, that’s just it! And I want to read the future! I want to know! That’s the tiresome part of it, you see, Esther! How can one be sure of anything? I like the men that succeed! Look at your Sir Humphrey—he reached the top of his own tree. They all say he was unique in his own way. But before men can do that they are old. Ever so charming and fascinating, lots of them keep, but still old. And the young ones—so many of them promise so well; and somehow it seems to begin and end there. Either they lose their chance, or they muff it, or they get shouldered aside in the race, and one hears no more of them. That’s the puzzle

of it all—one cannot tell what it is going to be. And if you wait to see—why, you grow old yourself in waiting!”

Esther partly understood. She had not watched Di all these months with the loving insight of her observant nature, without having gained a considerable knowledge of her somewhat complex character. If there were certain things which she never guessed at, certain reservations which she had never probed, she at least was not unaware of many of Diana's temptations and foibles. Now she put her hand out gently and stroked the golden head against her knee, saying:

“My dear child, you will learn as you grow older and wiser that it is not mere success which makes the happiness of life. You forget that it is love, as the old song says, that makes the world go round; the rest may or may not come. I do not think it always makes for happiness when it does. But true and earnest and unselfish love is its own crown and its own reward. Wait till that comes to you, my darling child, and you will find that all the other things fall into rank without any trouble or calculation. When it comes you will know how to value it, and it will simplify everything. It is an old-fashioned doctrine, I know, but it is none the less true for that.”

Diana put up her hand and took that of Esther, and held it fast, but she kept her face turned away nevertheless.

“That was the old way, and it answered in the old days, when women were old-fashioned darlings, and believed in men, and fell in love, as a matter of course, and generally managed to go on adoring their bargains—though even then I'm not sure that all the love matches turned out so remarkably well. But don't you know that we modern girls don't fall in love? We rather despise men. We think ourselves every bit as good as they—and rather better! Men don't marry as young as they did, because they can't, as a rule, afford it, and the girls grow up to be women—and they lose their illusions, and don't care so much about marrying—not if they

can have their own independence without. It's easy to fall in love at seventeen and eighteen—and up to twenty. I did it myself in a sort of way. I found it quite natural to get up romantic attachments for the boys that came along. But it's a vastly different matter now. I'm five-and-twenty, and I know too much to be caught easily. Men are very good as friends and companions. I like them, and they like me. But to take one of them altogether—for better, for worse! I should be horribly afraid it would be for worse. That's just the worry of it!”

Esther was silent awhile. She understood in measure, and yet to her love had been the one glorious and perfect thing in her whole life. She had given it in her early maidenhood, and she had never had cause to withdraw it. Whether as love or as friendship, it had been without flaw; the crown of her life, though it had been a source of pain as well as of joy. Her heart had always safely trusted in the great heart of the man who had through life been dearest to her. What the consummation of that faithful attachment would be she did not know yet, nor did she closely question. She was content in the present, and asked no hostages of the future. The restless, calculating spirit of her niece troubled her vaguely, as one of the signs of the times which she observed without fully comprehending. Diana seemed so joyous, so heart-whole, so young and gay for the most part, that Esther watched her with a sense of pure delight. When now and again she noted under-currents which indicated a troubling of the waters, and a strife of spirit which she could not entirely understand, she felt the stirrings of anxiety, and yet knew not how best to deal with the girl's ardent nature, save by giving to her unqualified love and sympathy. She was very certain that Rudolf Hastings was deeply smitten by the personal charm of her niece, and she had almost fancied when she saw them together that the girl's heart was also drawn towards him; but if ambition rather than affection were the compelling

power, would that be likely to make for the best happiness of either ?

Next day Rudolf appeared early, with Sally in his wake—a beaming and ecstatic Sally, who hurled herself out of the boat with a perilous vehemence, exclaiming :

“ It’s all right ; it’s all right ! Dad has given way. Rudolf has bested him ! We may have our race ; we may enter ourselves when we like ! And now we’ve got to make up our mind about our crew ; for we mustn’t have any rubbish in our boat, just for sentimental reasons ! ”

A very earnest and animated discussion now commenced, in which many appeals were made to Rudolf, who, bright-eyed and alert, was throwing himself keenly into the matter which seemed near to the heart of Diana. She was the stroke and captain of the boat, and Sally rowed behind her. Diana had suggested that her weight was rather great for stroke seat, and had offered to change with Sally ; but no one would hear of the alteration. It was Di’s long reach and perfect steadiness which were the chiefest elements of probable victory. Di was never nervous, never flurried, never lacking in cool confidence in herself. Her superb strength and her grace and finish alike made her conspicuous in any crew, whilst Sally, who could be trusted to row like a Trojan behind an able stroke, would never keep her head, had she the responsibility of judging and setting it.

Geraldine was coxswain of the boat, being at once small and light and quick of eye. She had really roused up to take an interest in this new outdoor pursuit, and had grown stronger in consequence. It was this benefit to Geraldine which had won over Lady Caroline to the new pastime of her energetic daughter, and she had actually raised no objections to the entry for the regatta, when once the Squire had been conquered by the diplomacy and tact of Rudolf.

Millicent Ballard, the doctor’s daughter, and Stella Sinclair had been most frequently the other two oars in the practice,

because they were most accessible when wanted quickly. But several of the more distant members had often rowed behind Di and Sally, and it was a matter of some importance now to select the best material which was available for the race, which was likely to be somewhat closely contested.

"I don't think Stella is good enough," said Sally decidedly. "I don't even know that she'd care to be tried for the race ; but I wouldn't have her, if I were you, Di. She's a pretty way of rowing, but she puts precious little back into it. It's all very well for ornamental paddling, but when we get to racing, that's quite another pair of shoes."

"Yes," spoke Rudolf, with some decision, "I don't think Stella is strong enough, and we can't depend upon her sufficiently for the practices. If anything happened in the parish or at home, of course she would have to attend first to that. We ought to have girls with a larger command of their time. And I doubt whether she would even care for the place if it were offered."

Truth to tell, Rudolf did not desire just at this juncture to be thrown too frequently into the company of Stella. He was somewhat displeased at the treatment he had received from her, and though he was swiftly reaching the conclusion that their youthful affection had not been more than a boy-and-girl affair, it had, nevertheless, hurt him in the rupture more than he altogether understood. He never saw her without a curious and uncomfortable thrill, and just now he had no desire to have her brought prominently before him. Sally thought only of the composition of the boat ; she did not mix things up in her wholesome, concrete mind. She wanted Rudolf to marry Stella, but she did not want Stella to spoil the race, either by nervousness or lack of muscle. She never, in fact, saw any connection between the two, and was eager to bring over some few of their best "men," as she was pleased to call them, for Rudolf to select from.

"I'll go out if I'm not good enough," she said heroically ;

but Di patted her on the back and told her that she would have nobody else behind her. Sally could always be trusted for backing up any spurt most loyally, whilst her strength was equal to Di's, and they pulled evenly one against the other. The remaining two should be selected from other members of the club near enough to attend the practices regularly; but about Diana and Sally no doubt existed in any minds.

Stella heard of her own disqualification quite quietly, and made no remark when Sally came and told her she was not thought either quite strong enough or quite sufficiently to be depended on for the place. She did not particularly desire to row in the regatta; but for all that, she was conscious of a little thrill of pain and hurt feeling at being passed over without even a trial.

"It is Di's doing, I know," she said to herself. "She does not like me, and she wants Rudolf all to herself. He is to be the next. I wonder how many more. If she cared for him—if she would make him happy—I would not mind. I want him to be happy—I would give up everything for that. But I do not believe he is anything to her save just another slave—another arrow in her quiver. Oh, it is a horrible thing to see a woman going on so! Sometimes I am afraid she is even coming between Miss Lynne and Sir Humphrey. Men are so blind where a beautiful woman is concerned; and she is beautiful, though I do not think there is much behind. I hope I am not growing jealous or bitter; but sometimes I do feel it rather hard. He would not have kept away, I think, as he has done lately, if it had not been for her."

Stella, passing to and fro in the village, saw a good deal of the practice of the boat, and of Rudolf coaching the girls, both in the four-oar and separately in pairs, he steering them in this latter practice. He, as coach, and Diana, as captain and stroke, were thrown constantly together. Stella saw them thus time after time, and noted the easy intimacy which had sprung up between them. She saw something new stealing into

Rudolf's manner—an indefinable air of mastership and command, which perhaps was the result of his position towards the girls, but which Stella could not but fancy had its roots in some deeper sentiment.

Rumour was rife through the village, and really it seemed not without cause. The Squire's son was a great favourite, and it was about time he should think of marriage; and who more suitable than the beautiful and wealthy maiden who had made for herself such a warm place in the hearts of the Cleethorpe people?

"It'll be a match before very long, you'll see," said the old folks; and Stella, with a strange pang at heart, wondered whether indeed it might not.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE FLOOD-TIDE OF TRIUMPH

THE regatta had come and gone. Diana's crew of girls at Cleethorpe had vanquished all rivals. Her own masterly rowing, combined with clear judgment and remarkable self-control in moments of excitement, had carried all before it. The race had been rowed in heats, and on one occasion a foul had only been avoided by Diana's quickness of eye and clear commands to the coxswain, whilst the rival boat, which had tried to take a rather mean advantage round the bend of the river, had been splendidly beaten by sheer good rowing during the final hundred yards. The shouts of applause had been good to hear, and Di was the observed of all observers that day.

Her stately height, her remarkable beauty, the rumours of her wealth and position, and the speculations concerning her future, all served to make of her an object of special interest to the inhabitants of the district. The girl knew this perfectly, and rejoiced in the sense of power which even this small triumph had won for her. It seemed to her an earnest of that which lay beyond, which she was reaching forward after with all the strenuous purpose of her eager nature. She was quick to hear and quick to note. She was perfectly aware that her name was linked with that of Sir Humphrey Vanborough in some quarters, with that of Rudolf Hastings in others. Some speculated whether young Mr. Vanborough might not be the favoured aspirant, and others watched the advances of the many young fellows of the locality who made

her little court, and asked whether one of these might not, after all, win the prize.

But the girl herself made no sign. She held the balances with a bewildering impartiality. Homage she received as naturally as though she were a queen upon her throne. Towards the elder men, such as the Squire and Sir Humphrey, there was in her manner a touch of pretty deference and arch playfulness, as though towards them she was not afraid or unwilling to show favour and liking; but for all that, no one, not even Esther Lynne herself, who watched her with loving eyes and sometimes a slightly anxious heart, could guess at those deeper feelings and purposes which must almost of necessity in such a nature as that underlie the surface charm and brilliance.

The girls regarded her with a generous admiration, scarcely touched by jealousy. She managed to hold their friendship and attachment, even though reigning as a queen in their midst. Some few held a little aloof. There were here and there to be found those who spoke of her as heartless and a flirt. But for the most part she laid her spell upon all with whom she came in contact, and she appeared as well pleased with the adulation and admiration of the girls as with that of the other sex. She never seemed to make the smallest effort to win masculine regard. She simply accepted it when offered in a spirit of open *camaraderie*, which was at once her chiefest charm and the chiefest peril to those who approached.

Even the Squire had been almost won over at the last to some enthusiasm about the race, and had driven over the Cleethorpe party in his own four-in-hand, which was only used on very special occasions. Sir Humphrey had also come to the fore, having had a great marquee erected in a meadow adjacent to the race-course, and inviting to lunch and tea all the ladies who had been engaged in the aquatic contests, as well as his own friends and neighbours from Cleethorpe and its vicinity. Esther Lynne and Diana helped

to do the honours of the entertainment for him, and most merrily did all go off. Interest and excitement were further stimulated by the appearance of a Hindoo juggler, who found his way into the meadow, and salaaming deeply before Sir Humphrey, petitioned to be permitted to show his skill in the sight of the ladies there assembled. Sir Humphrey conversed a little with the man in his own tongue. Cleeport, being a seaport town, often received visits from dark-skinned denizens of other lands. It was nothing very remarkable to see Lascars, Arabs, negroes, or natives of India walking its streets or lounging upon the quay. Sir Humphrey was eagerly beset by the ladies of the party to let them see what the man could do, and he smilingly assented, and gave the needful permission, which was received with a deep salaam of respect.

The tricks (which included some serpent charming) were of the sort which are common enough in India, and excited no wonder from the men who were familiar with them, but which held the rest of the company spell-bound and entranced. For out in the open meadow, without the possibility of artificial aid or trickery, there seemed something fearful and uncanny in the things they saw, and Diana gazed with the rest, fascinated by wonder and doubt. Her eyes were so quick; she had such confidence in her powers of observation, that she had felt almost that she would be able to detect and expose the subtle trickery which must be employed. Then, when she found herself nonplussed, she felt a momentary irritation and impatience. Her gaze wandered from the dark-skinned man to the ring of faces about him, and was suddenly arrested by the peculiar light she saw in York's deep-set eyes. His glance was fixed so earnestly upon the man that she was almost startled by the intensity of his gaze. It was not the clever trickery of those slim, rapidly-moving hands which so engrossed him; of that she was sure. He was studying the whole aspect and countenance of the conjurer, his brows drawn together in a slight frown, his lips compressed, his face tense.

Suddenly there leapt back into Diana's mind the memory of that confidence he had once made to her. He had spoken of some possible peril menacing Sir Humphrey Vanborough, and had connected it with some plot of Oriental origin. Since her own escapade of playing ghost, not a glimpse of the apparition had been seen, so far as she was aware, by any person in Cleethorpe. The villagers had been satisfied that what they had hitherto seen was "just the young lady having her bit of a game." It had never occurred to them that it had not been Diana all along, and she held her peace. But, at any rate, the former ghost seemed to have ceased its nocturnal prowlings. No one had caught so much as a glimpse of it, and Diana had forgotten in the pressure of recent events even those vague fears which York's words had once awakened. But as she watched the expression of his face at this minute, the memory of it all came back upon her with a curious insistency.

She turned and gazed at the juggler again. The dark face, the white turban—what did it suggest to her mind? If such a creature as that were shrouded in some enveloping cloak, would he not produce very much the same impression as a coifed nun—the white wrapping of the head, the dark nothingness of the face beneath, and the vague, shrouded figure of indistinct outline?

Could it be possible that such an interloper as that had found entrance into Nun's Bower even before the owner returned, and was lying in ambush there for him, so to speak? At the very thought of anything so strange and uncanny Diana's flesh crept. And yet, had she not been certain that something was gliding through the lower gallery that day, when she had been looking down from the upper one? And were not both she and others occasionally possessed by the strange sensation of not being alone in certain rooms—or, at least, in one room of that house? Were such things possible in this twentieth century? Were men still shadowed, and their safety

perhaps endangered through some mysterious blood feud, dating back for long generations perhaps, and transferred at last to the agent of the law who had brought condign punishment upon certain of the offenders? It was a rather terrible thought, but it might be so, if York were right. The tense expression on his face seemed to indicate that his thoughts were travelling in this direction. And suddenly, at that moment, their eyes met, and a look of mutual comprehension was flashed between them. Then York's face became impenetrable as a mask, and she felt that she would learn nothing from him, charm she never so wisely.

The Hindoo was rising and making his salaams prior to taking his departure. He was informing Sir Humphrey that he was his father and mother, and the protector of the poor, and a variety of other things, and as Archie Vanborough, who had picked up the current phrases of this sort of palaver, translated it aloud to the ladies, it evoked peals of merriment from them, in which Diana herself joined.

It was growing late now, the horses were already put to, and the party, with much laughter and many mutual congratulations and hopes for another merry meeting ere long, were bidding each other adieu.

Very soon Diana was mounted beside Rudolf on the box-seat of the drag, the Squire having surrendered the reins to his son, and Di being eager to finger the ribbons herself, as soon as they should be clear of the town and its traffic. She had not been asked to do this on the drive out, as she had to husband her strength for what lay before her, and run no risk of an unexpected wrench or strain. But now she was free to do as she would, and before long she and Rudolf had changed places, and she had the fine team of bays well in hand, swinging along the road home at a ten-mile-an-hour trot, Rudolf sitting beside her with a wary eye upon horses and driver, but his thoughts chiefly concentrated upon the latter.

Laughter and talk arose from behind. Archie and Sally were in great form, exchanging chaff and banter together. Sir Humphrey's genial presence was always felt as an addition to any company. He and Esther sat together, and each had something to contribute to the enlivenment of the party. The Squire himself was like a boy out on a holiday. He was proud of both his "little girls" now that his prejudices had been conquered. He declared that it was all very foolish and not very becoming, but that being granted, he had liked to see the way in which Sally had done her part in the races, and the judgment and skill shown by Geraldine in the steering. Of course, Diana had been the heroine of the occasion; but the Squire's daughters had backed her excellently, and they had quite done their part to ensure the victory upon which their captain had set her heart.

Diana's eyes were very bright as she looked now and again sideways at Rudolf.

"I hope you are proud of your crew," she said. "I think you are the only person who has not said pretty things to me! Have you any fault to find with our form, even though we carried off the palm of victory? Do not be afraid to say so if you have. I like to be praised; but I hate flummery. If you have any criticism to offer, don't keep it back. Let us have it out, and we will do better in the future."

"It's not that," he said, in a rather peculiar voice; "it's that I'm afraid if I once begin to speak I shall not know where to leave off. That is what I am afraid of!"

The flush which exertion, triumph, excitement and pleasure had painted upon Diana's cheeks to-day deepened very slightly before the ardent gaze of Rudolf's eyes.

"Really, I did not know we were as bad as all that!" she cried gaily, lightly flicking the off leader with her whip; "I must call together our crew and inform them of the terrible lecture in store for them. I don't think I can face it all alone. I must wait for my supporters!"

Rudolf observed her quietly as he made reply :

"You know that is not my meaning ; you know you did well—excellently. But you know, I think, that if I were to try and begin to praise you—to say what I thought about you—I should not know where or when to stop. Diana, will you let me try?"

He bent a little nearer to her in the dusk. The girl felt her heart throb ; but she knew there were other eyes behind her. Was not Stella somewhere in the rear ? Sir Humphrey, too, and others who might be watching them—who might be keen to note the significance of any very earnest talk. She was conscious in a moment that though she liked to know that Rudolf loved her, she did not wish him to come to the point. Their friendship was very pleasant to her. Perhaps some day—she did not know—yet it might be that he was the man who would be able to give her that which she chiefly wanted. But she was not sure. She did not intend to be hurried. There was so much to think of before any irrevocable words were spoken. Certainly she did not wish to send him away ; but neither did she desire to commit herself too much.

"I like you to praise me," she said, flashing a smile at him, frank and pleasant and sweet ; "we were friends from the first, were we not ? And you have been just delightful all this time—our best champion and friend. Don't let us spoil that by too much soft sawder. I like you best when you abuse us a little. I like spice with my cakes, and salt with my meat. Now look at that mare—the near wheeler. Do you think she is going to bolt ? She's got her ears laid back very flat. Something is coming into her head. What do you think it is?"

"She hears a motor-car coming behind ; that's what annoys her. She is like some others of her sex, she likes to be first. She can't endure being passed ; she always tries to race motors. Shall I take the ribbons till the snorting abomination has gone by?"

Diana yielded them up; not that she was nervous in the least, or doubted her powers of control. But there were moods of hers when she felt that it was more graceful and more attractive to show consciousness of the superior powers of mankind. She leaned back in her seat and looked behind at the approaching motor-car, and at the rest of the company.

"Now, Squire, here comes one of your deadly foes. Do let us hear one of your best sermons delivered in your best style!" she cried, with her sauciest and archest laugh. "I'm thinking of setting up a motor-car myself, and being my own driver and engineer—"

"Really, my dear! Well, in that case, I think we had better all of us bespeak our graves in the churchyard. It's getting rather full, you know, and they might wish to consider the question as to the enlargement which would then become advisable. Steady, lassie, steady. There, there, now, it's all safely over. Phew! what a disgusting reek it leaves behind!"

"Then, Squire, if I'm not to have a motor-car without becoming the butt of so many insults, you'll really have to find me some horses. I feel like settling down here for the winter, if Esther will keep me, and I must have something to ride. You know you are pledged to teach me to hunt, and I suppose I can't hunt on a motor-car—"

"Some fellows think they can!" snorted the Squire, in sudden wrath; "and more will do so as time goes on, you'll see! Cover fifty miles or more on their stinking abominations, scare the horses to death, and go tearing like hell-hounds let loose all over the place, getting some yokels to tell them the likely spots to cut into the hunt, and spoiling the whole run for the real sportsmen. You never know when you cross a road whether you won't find a dozen of these snorting monsters lying in wait. Hunters aren't used to them as harness horses have to be. They don't understand them, and baulk and get nervous and unmanageable, and lose the

enthusiasm of the run, as their riders do. I call it a scandal and a prostitution of sport. I'd like to—" And the Squire, being well started, launched forth, whilst Diana turned with laughing eyes back to Rudolf.

"I do love your father!" she cried; "I could listen to him for ever. I would like to take him a trip over the pond, and let him speak his mind to the Yanks. It would be just improving to hear him at it!"

There was no chance after that for Rudolf to pursue the theme he had been suddenly surprised into starting. He had himself well in hand, and understood at once that Diana was not yet ready to surrender her liberty to anybody. He could not wonder at it. He did not wish to hurry her, to rush her into any step she might afterwards regret having taken. He wanted her immensely, but he kept a level head, and knew that others were running him hard in the race. He felt he was better worth the prize than many of these. He believed that Diana would herself become more and more aware of this. Rudolf intended to be a man with a career—not just a country squire like his father, or a man of means and leisure, such as some of those who followed in the train of the beauty. He meant to do something with his life. Already he saw looming before him the prospects of a Parliamentary career. He would certainly be put up sooner or later as a candidate for some constituency. When that chance occurred he meant to work it for all he knew. He believed that this girl would be his warmest and chiefest ally. She was just such a wife as a rising politician needed. She was interested already in the world in which he moved. He would win her to greater interest yet. He thought he saw his way before him, and he could afford to wait. But he did not mean to be beaten, and he did not think he should be.

It was a week of triumph for Diana. Two days later the water-party at Bishop's Hall was held, and the girl carried off prize after prize in the mimic contests, though she often

gracefully declined the real concrete prize, being amply satisfied with her victory, and insisting that the second candidate should receive it instead.

“It is not fair,” she would say; “I ought to be handicapped—I am such a hulker! Of course, I have longer reach and more muscle. And I have so much more time and opportunity to practise. It isn’t fair that I should take everything. It’s not really that I’m any better, only I’m built like a man—and ought to be handicapped as though I were one!”

They laughed at this designation of herself; but her strong will carried the day, and the prizes were thus fairly evenly divided amongst the different competitors, and Sir Humphrey, who watched Esther dispensing them towards the close of the day, regarded Diana with kindly glances, and said, as she joined him at the close of proceedings for a stroll round the gardens:

“That was prettily done on your part, my dear. You have made a great many young things very happy to-day.”

“Ah, but it would have been horrid of me to take all the prizes. I should have been so ashamed! I do like to be first—I sometimes wonder whether that may not be my besetting sin. I like to feel that I do the thing best, and am liked the best, and admired the most! But that is quite enough for me. I don’t want all the real solid prizes too. I consider I have quite my fair share—and more—of the good things of this world. It is the kudos I want—not the prize-money—if you know what I mean. Tell me, do you think that sort of feeling is wrong? I have it sometimes so strongly that I am almost afraid of myself. I sometimes wonder whether it is a feeling which belongs to men more than women. I know when I try to talk to Esther about it she does not fully understand, though she is always so sweet over anything I take to her for advice. I know she thinks it a sort of snare or peril; and yet sometimes I feel as though it must be something the same feeling which has made the great men

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of the world what they are. I have an instinct that Lord Kitchener (for instance) would understand me. He is the sort of man who goes straight ahead, and carries everything before him—as I want to do. Tell me, Sir Humphrey—please tell me the truth—do you think it is a wrong feeling?”

She looked at him with a luminous appeal in her eyes. The light of the golden sunset was behind her, investing the graceful white-robed figure with a peculiar radiance. Her beauty was wonderfully insistent at such a moment, and he was more keenly conscious of it perhaps than he had ever been before.

“Not perhaps a wrong feeling, my dear; for, as you say, I think it is a feeling akin to that which has inspired some of the greatest heroes of history; but possibly rather a dangerous one, too, or holding elements of danger in its scope, against which we should guard ourselves.” He paused a moment, and as her eyes still searched his with earnest, questioning gaze, he added: “I think we should try and be sure that our love of power and supremacy does not come from personal and sordid motives. If we want it for ourselves alone—for our own enjoyment or our own aggrandisement—then I think it must become a snare to us. But if it is for our country, for what we can accomplish for her, or in the interests of humanity and civilisation, or,” and here he made a little pause, lowered his voice, and bared his head, “if by our own advancement we can further the purposes of God, work His will in measure, do some work which He has set us to do, then I think we shall have within us the antidote of that which might else be perilous to us. I do not know whether I have made my meaning plain, my dear, or whether my opinion is worth the having, but that is, as best as I can put it, what I feel.”

“Thank you,” said Di, looking out straight before her, “I shall think of your words. I feel sure you know what is the truth.”

He was carried off from her then by some call from the distance. She did not accompany him, but stood in the same attitude, her eyes fixed full ahead.

"Yes, that is the crux of the whole matter, I can see. He has just put his finger on the spot. Other-people whom I fancy I am like have been working for noble ends—for sovereign, country, or cause. But I am working just for my own self. Diana Conquest is the sun and centre of my world, and at present I do not even want any other."

CHAPTER XIX

RENUNCIATION

STELLA was sobbing bitterly. So absorbed was she, for the moment, in her own woes, that she did not hear the slow, halting footfall, which she knew so well by this time, and York had reached the threshold of the open door before he was aware of what was going on inside that big familiar room of Stella's, to which he had long had privilege of entrance, without ceremony or any sort of announcement. He came and went at his own pleasure, and had the liberty to remain and rest there at will in the absence of its owner.

He had heard a little sound as of grief, and thought that he should find Stella consoling one of the twins, or some other child in trouble. It never occurred to him that she might be in trouble herself. Generally, Stella was so self-contained and collected, that it filled him with astonishment and also with dismay to see her so shaken with the tempest of her grief. He closed the half-open door through which he had entered, and advanced towards her with an anxious face.

“My dear child, what is the matter?”

She gave a great start at the sound of his voice, and sprang up, upsetting, as she did so, a little easel before which she had been seated, and a rough charcoal sketch fluttered and fell almost at his feet.

“Oh, don't look—don't look!” cried Stella; but she spoke too late.

He had looked and seen, and now replaced the drawing in

its former position, whilst Stella struggled convulsively with the choking sobs that still burst from her over-charged heart.

The drawing, rough though it was, spoke eloquently in its own way. It represented a man and a woman engrossed in each other—it indicated an absorption which could only mean one thing. Rudolf Hastings was the man—and the artist had indicated, in a masterly fashion, the eagerness and resolute purpose in his whole face and pose. The woman was Diana Conquest—beautiful, and yet just a little repellent, as had been the case in another sketch of her which York had seen by the same hand. He could not define wherein that element of repulsion lay; yet he was keenly conscious of it, and it told him more eloquently than words could ever do, of the feeling which Diana inspired in the heart of Stella.

But the picture seemed to tell him something else. He had not forgotten Sally's words of a few weeks back; he had not forgotten a number of minor details which he had since observed or surmised. He was very strongly of opinion that Rudolf and Stella had been lovers once—whether they actually knew it themselves or not—that something had intervened between them, and that Stella was suffering, if he were not. Now this picture seemed to give him the opportunity to speak which had been lacking before.

"Is that so?" he asked slowly, his kindly hand upon Stella's shoulder. "I have not heard it—though, of course, I have seen indications. Are they engaged? And is it this that is troubling you, my little Stella? Don't mind telling me if it is. You know I am only a battered old bachelor, who half broke his heart when he was a boy over your mother's marriage, and has been heart-whole ever since, because no one has come up to his ideal. Perhaps I shall understand the trouble better than you would think to look at me. Don't cry so bitterly, my child, but try and talk the sorrow out. Sometimes that is the best way of getting rid of the first bitterness. You know your secret will be safe with me."

"Oh, Uncle Don, it's not that only—it's everything!" cried Stella, with sudden passion in her tones. "Everything is going wrong—all my plans—my hopes—all my world is going to pieces about me. I don't know how to bear it—I don't indeed."

Never had he guessed at the passionate depths which underlay Stella's exterior reserve and self-control. He was utterly at a loss to know what could have happened so to upset her; but he regarded himself as her next-of-kin and lawful protector after her father, and he set himself to the task of first understanding and then grappling with this state of misery and despair, from whatever sources it might spring.

He sat down and drew her towards him. She did not resist, and made no effort to master her tears. His kindly touch upon her shoulder seemed to give her strength and courage. Presently she wiped her eyes and sat quiet, letting him take her hand and hold it in his.

"Now, Stella, that is better. Remember, my dear, I do not want to force your confidence, but do you not think it might ease your heart if you were to talk it all out with someone older than yourself? I have lived nearly twice as long in the world as you have, and have seen a good bit of the rough and tumble of life, and perhaps I shall be able to help you in your battle or trouble, or whatever it is."

"And you won't laugh at me, Uncle Don?"

"That, indeed, I can promise you, Stella. I do not think that any trouble, even the most trivial or the most well-merited, can ever occasion mirth or scorn in the minds of those who have ever known themselves what trouble means."

"Oh, Uncle Don, I like to talk to you. You seem to understand me. So many of the others laugh—they would laugh at me now, if they were here. It was something father told me this very morning which seemed to put the finishing touch to everything. Have you heard about it? It is partly

Sir Humphrey Vanborough's doing. He is going to have a curate!"

There was something of a tragic note in her voice; but York did not smile. He waited to hear more.

"I know how kindly it is meant. Father is not so strong as he was, and the parish has extended, and that little mission church away on the moor, belonging to Cleethorpe and Stillwater, is a tax upon him. I know last winter he was tried and overdone. I believe I ought to be glad. I hate myself sometimes that I am not more unselfish. Sir Humphrey and Miss Lynne and a few more are going to subscribe the sum needful for a curate, and I believe Edna's brother will come. And Edna says his wife is sweet, and has two little children, and most likely will take our three and teach them all together—she seems to have a great gift for teaching. And he is musical, and will train the choir. Father says he thinks that it should be done in a different way now. Diana spoilt all the old methods, which were good enough before she came; and now she is tired of it, and has unsettled the boys and made them despise me; and they are unruly, and sometimes impertinent, and not a bit reverent over the practising, as they used to be. They expect to be amused. Diana could amuse them; and they are bored when she isn't there, and behave badly, and some of them have had to be turned out. Father says they want a man's hand over them. It never used to be so. But everything is going wrong now; and soon I shall be of no use at all, and shall have nothing left to do!"

The tears had all been shed; but the deep, almost passionate, intensity of the tone was more tragic than another burst of weeping would have been.

"I can scarcely think that, Stella," answered York, kindly and gently; "you have been almost too busy heretofore. Everybody says your hands have been too full. It will not be amiss, surely, if you have time to join more in the young

life of the place and in those recreations which are natural to youth and health. It is not always well to live in a drive, and to be overburdened with the worries of a whole parish."

Stella was silent for a moment, and then she burst out almost passionately :

"Those are just the things I do not care for—amusements, recreations, games and pastimes, which lead to nothing, and do no good in the world. I always believed life was given to us for better ends. I was so glad that there were always other things for me to do. I cannot give up myself and my life to sports and games, or to society pleasures. That is not the higher life—the life of self-sacrifice. I was quite young when I began to understand what that meant. I tried from the beginning to follow the light. I have given up almost everything I cared most for—first, those things which other girls do, because they seemed trivial, and I saw how absorbing they became if followed ; then my art, because I loved it better than anything in the world, and I thought it might become a snare to me. Then Rudolf—" She stopped short there and came to a dead pause. The colour flooded her face, and she turned it slightly away.

"Did you give up Rudolf Hastings?" asked York quietly. "Am I right in thinking that once you and he were lovers?"

"I don't know exactly what you would call it. We were not engaged," answered Stella, "but we cared for each other. We had always done that. He asked me once if I would marry him some day, and I said I would, if he would wait till I could be spared."

She stopped short, and York said, with a slight smile : "Well, and perhaps that time may be coming at last, Stella."

"Yes, when it is too late!" she cried suddenly and passionately. "It is my fault, Uncle Don. Don't blame him. He came to me in the spring. He had inherited that little fortune. He wanted us to be married soon. I did not see how I could be spared. I told him so. He was rather angry.

We did not exactly quarrel ; but he said it must be one thing or the other, either we must be engaged and married in reasonable time—or else there must be an end.”

“ Well, Stella ? ”

“ I did not see how I could be spared. There were so many, many things then ; and I thought Rudolf was selfish. We were young, and we must think of others before ourselves. I spoke to him about renunciation, and he did not seem to understand or sympathise. I thought perhaps we should not be happy together. So I told him there had better be an end of it—and he went away. Somehow I did not quite know what it would be like without him. And now he has forgotten all about it. He only thinks of Diana Conquest. He would marry her to-morrow if she would have him ; and I think perhaps she will have him—if nobody better turns up. But she does not love him. She does not know what love means. She will never, never be able to make him happy. Oh, Rudolf—Rudolf ! ”

York sat still and quiet before this self-revelation. When he spoke it was in gentle and reassuring tones.

“ Things, indeed, do seem to be going wrong with you, little Stella ; but we need not quite make up our minds it will always be so. You gave up Rudolf from a sense of duty, was that it ? And do you think he understood that it was not from a lack of love ? ”

Stella spoke with a certain hopelessness of tone.

“ Sometimes I don't think anybody understands—not even Miss Lynne, though she is always kind. I know she never approved of my giving up my drawing, which I love better than any other occupation in the world. But that is just it. When I love a thing like that I feel that there must almost be something wrong about it. I must put every other duty first, and give it up, if need be. All the most beautiful lives I know have been lives of self-sacrifice. That is what I have always wanted mine to be. I have always tried to give up the things I cared for most.”

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"That you might follow the more closely in the footsteps of our Lord," spoke York reverently; "that has been the thought in your heart, I think, Stella."

Tears of another sort suddenly stood in her eyes.

"Indeed, indeed, it has, Uncle Don! I am so glad you understand—some people don't. Not so very long ago Diana Conquest told me I was talking nonsense when I tried to say something like that to her. I find it so hard to make people understand what I mean. But I can never get rid of this conviction: the Pattern Life was a life of self-sacrifice, and therefore we who call ourselves His followers, and are called by His name, must also sacrifice ourselves, and give up our own will, and choose the hard and stony paths instead of the smooth and pleasant ones. Look at Miss Lynne's life; look at yours, Uncle Don. You have both given up so much, suffered so much, and it has made you different from other people."

He did not speak; he sat looking straight before him.

Stella's eyes sought his face, and she asked softly: "Do you understand, Uncle Don?"

"Yes," he answered; "I think I understand your point of view, Stella. But I also understand that of the people who seem to you unsympathetic and lacking in comprehension. Do you really fail to see what they mean, too, though they may not put it very sympathetically?"

"I think I understand very well," she answered; "they are not willing for self-sacrifice themselves, and they cannot understand it in anybody else. People don't like—whether they know it or not—to hear a higher standard advocated than they are prepared to live up to themselves. I don't mind saying this to you, Uncle Don, because you will not misunderstand me, and think I have an exalted opinion of myself. I know how very, very far short I fall: All I can say is, that I am trying, and that the life of self-sacrifice is the life of Christ. That is so, is it not, Uncle Don?"

"It is—and it is not—if you know what I mean, Stella. Do you understand what I mean when I tell you that you are putting (as the homely proverb has it) the cart before the horse?"

She did not understand, and her face showed it.

"Our Lord came to live upon earth as Man, not, primarily, to suffer and die, but to do the will of the Father. That was the end and aim and object of His mission. That the will of the Father involved the bitter suffering of the Cross, the laying down of the human life, that He might receive it again in Resurrection glory as the first-fruits of those that sleep, He knew, and in that knowledge He went forward along the appointed path without flinching, as followers of His have done along their appointed path of suffering in the power they have received from Him. But our Lord has left us a very beautiful and a very significant lesson, which should be to us a warning, as well as a lesson—a warning against any sort of morbid love of self-immolation and suffering for its own sake, if it be not appointed us from God Himself."

He paused; but Stella said nothing, only keeping her hands rather closely locked together.

"In the Garden of Gethsemane He prayed that the cup of trial and suffering might pass from Him—that He might not be called upon to drink it; but only that—if it were the will of the Father. There, again, came the crux and touchstone of the whole matter—the will of God. He did not choose suffering and death; but He bore it without a murmur when convinced that His Father had willed it for Him. It was necessary for the Captain of our salvation to be made perfect through sufferings. But are we ever told that we are to be perfected (of necessity) in the same way?"

"I thought we were to follow Him."

"Yes; but as He shall show us the way. He received gifts for men when He ascended into the heavenlies, which by the Spirit He transmitted to us below—apostles, prophets,

evangelists, pastors, and teachers, 'for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the Body of Christ.' We are perfected not through works or sufferings of our own, but through His gifts. As with Him, so with us; we may not decide whether this or that act of self-sacrifice may be appointed us. I mean that we must not regard it as a foregone conclusion that every act of renunciation is a step forward along the heavenly road. We must ask whether it be the will of God that we make it. He has given us all things richly to enjoy. He may ask of us to renounce some of these; but He does not desire to see us, His children, throw back all His good gifts in His face, and then flatter ourselves that we are of necessity pleasing Him. He gives us talents which it is a joy to us to exercise, and which may be exercised also to the good or the pleasure of our fellowmen, and often in measure to His honour and glory. He does not give us these tastes and talents with one hand to snatch them away with the other—at least, I cannot believe it. We must use, of course, a discretion and moderation in all things. But I believe that of each talent entrusted to us we shall be asked to render account one day. To bury it in the earth is not to use it for His honour. Little Stella, do you say of God that He is an austere man, reaping where He has not sown, and gathering where He has not strawed, that you are so resolved to make no use of the talent entrusted you, or to let everything else take precedence of it, and think you are doing well in this?"

Her eyes had suddenly lighted eagerly.

"Oh, Uncle Don, I had never thought of it like that! Do you think my drawing is a talent like that?"

"I certainly do, Stella. It is a gift bestowed; its exercise, of course, in moderation, would take you out of yourself and your little wearing treadmill; it would be a source of pleasure to you and to others; and, moreover, it might be one day—if

you do not marry, perhaps even if you do—a factor of no small importance in your life and in that of others.”

“How do you mean?”

“Why, I mean a very practical thing. I mean you might make money by this talent. Your father is not a man of private means. He has three little children, besides yourself, and a delicate wife. If anything were to happen to him, it would become a serious question how you would all live. These are things which should be thought of, Stella. And even if you never really wanted money in this way, its possession might enlarge your sphere of usefulness in many ways. This, of course, is a more mundane view of the matter, but it is not one to be altogether set aside. You have a brother. Some day, perhaps, you will want to visit him. It would be a joy to you both; but travelling is a costly pleasure, and you might not be able to afford it, unless you could make the money. He might some day be in need of help for some venture. If you could furnish the funds, what a pleasure it would be to you both! But you know I would not say these things to you if I believed that the exercise of your talent would be a snare to you—following a lower path, and leading you into temptation. It is because I believe God gave you that gift to exercise that I want to see you doing so. And now that your way seems opening for a larger command of your time, instead of weeping you should be smiling, and preparing some of those canvases and colours, and getting ready to start work again!”

“Oh, Uncle Don, if I only dared to think it!”

His face, which had been smiling, grew grave again, and he looked very earnestly upon her as he said:

“Until you can see and believe in your heart that it is right, you must not do it, Stella. St. Paul has warned us never to tamper with the conscience of the weak brother. If even an innocent thing seem sinful to him, then he must not touch it. We may not laugh and flout his scruples,

but we may strive to open his eyes, and to strengthen that feeble grip he has upon the glorious liberty of the children of God, which enables them richly to enjoy and abundantly to use those gifts which He has bestowed upon them. But if, through lack of faith, or a morbid perversion of certain truths, he cannot see his liberty, then he must wear his fetters till God strikes them off from him. See here, Stella, you are running the risk of spoiling your own life, and perhaps that of another, by your passion for self-sacrifice. What I want you to be quite certain of is whether it be God's will that you sacrifice all these things to your code of duty, or whether you are not deciding for yourself, simply because you believe the harder path invariably to be the one you are called upon to tread. If this be so, then you are in danger of that false righteousness which tends to pride and not humility, and which may become a snare to you such as your work would scarcely be."

He had risen, and was moving with his slow strides up and down the place.

"Stella, you spoke once of me—you instanced my wreck of a carcass as a case of self-sacrifice. It was nothing of the kind. I simply did my duty as an English officer, and got badly cut up, and am what you see now. Do you think I wanted to be sacrificed? What would you have thought of me, or any other soldier who had deliberately walked into danger for the sake of sacrificing himself, as you call it? You would see instantly what a hideous and unpardonable act that would have been. A soldier does the will of his superior officer—and takes the cost and the risk; there again you have the case in a nutshell. If he take the risk and the cost without orders—without the *raison d'être*, he is a fool, if not a knave. That is your pitfall, Stella, only in another form.

"You can see the point when put crudely in that fashion, but the principle will apply equally to your own life. Be sure

that such sacrifices, such renunciations as you make are according to the will of God, not selected by yourself. Remember that the calling of the Christian is to follow the Lamb whithersoever He leadeth, not to decide which is the way of the Cross and follow that, whether that be the road He appoints for us or not. There, I have done. I never meant to preach you such a sermon, but when I see the child of my Stella crying her heart out like that, I must see what the matter is ; and I think the fountain-head of all these tears, my child, has been the discovery that there is something wrong with your theories of life ; but that something can be set to rights by a little serious thinking, and a good deal of earnest prayer."

CHAPTER XX

THE WANING OF SUMMER

ESTHER stood at an upper window, a fleecy wrap about her head and shoulders, waving an adieu to Diana, as she rode away upon her mettlesome chestnut to join Sir Humphrey and Colonel York—and later on the Squire, and possibly Sally, for a “training run,” as she termed it, for herself and her new possession.

A crisp touch of autumnal chill had suddenly come, as though to remind them of the approaching change of season. The heliotropes and some of the more delicate of the bedding plants hung blackened heads and shrivelled leaves earthwards, though the hardier flowers yet made brave show; and Esther declared it her opinion that these few premature frosts would be succeeded by plenty more bright, warm weeks, and refused to permit any wholesale destruction of her summer garden.

But the cold—or something else—had also laid hands upon herself, and for a week now she had not been downstairs. She sometimes felt that her health had suffered somewhat from the long years of confinement spent in the heated and enervating atmosphere of her invalid father's room. She was herself one of those who loved fresh air and sunshine, and to whom an outdoor life was a joy. But it had been her lot to live in something of a hothouse atmosphere, and this had developed in her a susceptibility which had not been natural to her in her youth, and for which she was not prepared. This, at least, was how she accounted for the little attack of threatened pleurisy which had forced her to keep to her room these last

days. And now, though the sun was shining, and she was longing to be out again, she had promised to remain one more day in durance vile, though she had insisted upon Diana's taking the projected ride, which was to be something of a trial of the capabilities of her new hunter, and of the girl's own qualifications as a horsewoman.

The Squire and Sir Humphrey had both interested themselves not a little over the question of Diana's hunter. Sir Humphrey had been setting his own stables in order with a view to some riding and hunting for himself, and also for York, in so far as he was able to indulge in that congenial exercise. He was now sufficiently recovered to enjoy saddle exercise in moderation. He had neither the strength nor the means to hunt, and would not have indulged himself in that pastime at another man's cost. But he could not refuse to mount the sturdy cob Sir Humphrey had included amongst his own purchases, and already the congenial and familiar exercise was having a beneficial effect upon him.

It was natural under these circumstances that Diana should solicit Sir Humphrey's co-operation in the matter of her own hunter. The Squire was the adviser and referee of them both, and took a lively interest in the choice.

"I think I should like him fair best," Diana had said. "I'll not make a point of it. If he comes dark, I'll take him ; but for choice I prefer fair men and fair horses !"

So when this handsome chestnut had been passed sound, warranted to take fences and water-jumps without flinching, and to show a sovereign contempt for motor-cars and engines of all descriptions, Diana was delighted to feel him her own possession, delighted alike with his bright "fair" coat, with his symmetry and strength of build, and with that hot and fiery temper which the Squire told her usually went with chestnuts, unless they were "slugs."

"It's a curious thing with that colour, they're almost always either extra hot, or extr'y 'logy,' as my old friend Jim the whip

used to call it. You don't often get the medium with chestnuts. But he's a nice-tempered creature—no vice about him. That's where I draw the line for a woman's riding. I hate to see a habit on a vicious horse. But a high spirit and playfulness, with a good temper and a good mouth—that's what I like myself, and try to get for my friends. I think that's what you will find you have got in Conquerer, my dear. I know the stock he comes from. I don't think he'll fail you."

It was Archie who gave the creature his name. Diana laughed and called it appropriate, and it stuck from that moment. Esther, as she watched the pair that crisp autumnal morning, thought that they looked as though they could conquer the world between them. She followed them with her eyes to the gate, where the other horsemen awaited her. She saw the greetings exchanged between them, saw how Diana rode along beside Sir Humphrey, turning her bright face towards him, eager over some question she was putting. She saw him bend towards her, and seem to show her something about the holding of the reins. She remembered with a little thrill how in old days she and Humphrey Vanborough had ridden side by side down that very leafy lane, and how he had shown her the military fashion of using the reins, which she had invariably adopted so long as she continued her riding. She had given up this exercise, as she had given up so many things, because her nervous and fretful father could not bear the thought of her continuing it. She found that he was always worse on her return—that he was always picturing imaginary accidents and perils for her. She had fought his fancies as long as she was able, and then, when she had found it impossible longer to combat them, and saw that he really suffered, she quietly gave up her own pleasure, and for seven years had never mounted a horse.

The riders vanished round the bend of the road, but Esther still stood gazing out over the sunny October world. There was an immense depth of sweetness in her eyes—but was there

just a touch of sadness too? Diana had been telling Esther all through the summer that she was growing younger, that she was younger and prettier every day. But to-day she felt just a little as though the frost of age had touched her—as the autumn frost had touched her garden. She had had a wonderfully happy summer. Often it had come over her with a little thrill of wonder, almost of self-reproach, how happy this summer had been—the first one since her loss. And to-day she was not unhappy—only something had just come to dim, as it were, by a faint breath, the sunshine in which she had been walking. She scarcely knew what it meant herself; but she found herself asking questions, each one of which brought a tiny little pang to her own heart.

“Would it be for her happiness—and for his? They are the two dearest things I have upon earth. If it should be so with them, would it not be a joy to me? I think that I am growing old. Is it not always that a woman ages before a man? He is not old—not in heart or in mind or in constitution. And Di—dear, loving, impetuous Di—does she not want a strong hand over her? Does she not feel that herself sometimes? Is it not that consciousness which makes her so often leave the young men for him? Has she not that feeling of safety in his presence which I know so well? Why should she not care for him? He is old enough to be her father, in truth; but many happy wives have husbands as old; and is age, after all, quite so much a matter of years as some people think? I wonder—I wonder! Oh, if it were for their happiness I should be glad—I should rejoice!

“My dream is quite, quite over and done with. Of course, there will never be for me anybody like him in all the world. That I have always known—I love the knowledge. But when we grow old we can content ourselves with that which in youth seems such a poor exchange—friendship for love. He will always be my friend—the best and truest friend. Nothing can change that. But does he desire anything else? Sometimes I have

thought—but that may be all my fancy. I have so little to offer him—I am just an old-fashioned, middle-aged woman, without anything to attract. My love he would have—the love of a lifetime; but after all, what is that? And she is so beautiful—so brilliant; she would make a name for herself in the gay world—and he has a name and a reputation of his own. And if she has come to love him?—ah, let me not stand for one moment in the light of her happiness! Would I have her suffer, that I might be a little more happy than I am now? Oh, no, no!—God knows that her happiness and her safety stand first in my heart. I sometimes think she is in danger—in danger from herself. He would help her to fight her battles. He perhaps sees what I do of the perils which beset her—perils of which she is partly conscious herself—and seeks aid against from us. Shall she seek in vain? My dearest sister's only child! Ah, if it is not to be for myself—that noble, generous heart—let it be for her!”

Esther had scarcely regained her pleasant upstairs parlour, and settled herself before the cheerful fire with her books, her work, and some letters to answer, before her solitude was invaded by Stella, who entered with a very bright face, and with a square, slim package, carefully wrapped, in her hands.

“I have brought you a little present, Miss Lynne,” she said; “I do hope you will like it. May I undo and show it to you?” And without waiting for answer, Stella slipped off string and wrappers, and displayed a crayon head of Sir Humphrey Vanborough.

It was a telling likeness. Esther almost started as she met the level, direct gaze of the pictured eyes, which seemed looking straight into her own, with just that mellow friendliness and kindliness which was so marked and characteristic of her old friend. Stella was talking eagerly.

“It is Di's idea. She brought him to my studio for it. She has persuaded him that I can paint his portrait for the Academy next spring, and that if he will let me do so, it

might be the means of my getting hung there. I can scarcely believe it! It seems too good to be true; but they seem to think that the portrait of Sir Humphrey Vanborough, K.S.I., would have a very good chance of a place, if the painting were not too fearfully bad. And I will work—oh, how I will work! But I said that the first sketch I made must be for you. Dear Miss Lynne, you have always been telling me that I ought not to neglect my drawing, and now I am so happy at taking it up once more that sometimes I begin to be frightened again; only I am trying to grow into the feeling that it is one of those things given me richly to enjoy. And oh! how I do enjoy it!”

“My dear child, I am so glad! How has it all come about?”

“I think it is Uncle Don’s doing, really; though, of course, it is a great deal because Edna’s brother and his wife have come, and I have so much more time now. Only if it had not been for Uncle Don, and the things he had made me see, I don’t think I should have dared to do anything I liked so much. I am half afraid now sometimes. I can’t quite get over the feeling that the thing one wants most to do is the thing which one ought to give up first. But Uncle Don says it is a want of faith, and shows an imperfect understanding of the fatherly love of God. Do you think that, too?”

“I think, dear, that the real essence of it all is that we should not be too eager to choose for ourselves, but to ‘wait upon God,’ as it says in the Psalm, leaving Him to direct our path and our way. And it may be just as self-willed of us to be resolved to give up that which is dearest to us, should it be a gift or a talent which He may have endowed us with for some wise and useful purpose, as to choose some pleasant path merely for our own gratification. Would an earthly father be pleased with this spirit in a child, if, when he gave his son something, the use and exercise of which would be for pleasure and profit, the boy were to lay it aside and scarcely

touch it, saying, 'I enjoy it too much, therefore it must be wrong or dangerous.' We know that such a spirit of renunciation in other times led men and women to that unnatural life of the cloister, and robbed the world of influences which might have been very beneficial to it. In these modern days, when it seems so hard for people to show moderation, when they are so prone to ride their hobbies to death, I often think the danger is much the same. Whether it is for pleasure, or whether it is for work, or whether it is for self-sacrifice and devotion—people seem in danger of overdoing it. I suppose it is the spirit of the age. One sees it in everything. But our baptismal vow of temperance in all things covers the whole field. If only we thought more and prayed more for that spirit, I often think we should go less often astray."

"How strange that you should have said that! It is exactly what Uncle Don is always telling me. I did not understand at first what he meant; I am not quite sure that I am clear now. He does not say anything against them, but I know he does not like all our local guilds and associations and confraternities. He thinks that they often waste time and energy in straining at side-issues, instead of driving home the real integral truth. I don't know quite what to think about it. Uncle Don is very kind and nice, and understands that one has to try all sorts of things to get hold of people. But he always comes back to that same point—the baptismal vow. He says that that covers everything—which, indeed, it does—and that we ought to be hammering at that good old fundamental vow already taken, instead of imposing little differently-worded, and what he once called 'trumpery,' promises and undertakings, when so much more had really been solemnly pledged."

Esther sat looking at the picture before her, whilst Stella talked on and unbosomed herself of so many of the doubts and perplexities which had been assailing her lately. Suddenly she heard words which arrested her attention afresh, though

it had not really wandered, and she had given sympathetic and comprehending answers to the confidences bestowed upon her.

“Just think of it. You were no older than Diana when you made that great renunciation. Oh, please don’t mind my speaking of it, for of course everybody knows how much Sir Humphrey cared for you when he was a young man. I have always had that before my eyes. It is your example partly, Miss Lynne, that always made me feel that self-sacrifice was such a holy and beautiful and elevating thing. And how can I help feeling it more than ever in watching Diana now? Everything, everybody, is to be sacrificed to her pleasure. She does not think and she does not care, so long as she is first, so long as she is amused. She took Rudolf away from me—well, perhaps that is speaking too strongly. I had sent him away myself, but I think he would not have taken my words as so final but for her. I tried not to mind. I was ready to give him up if it were for his happiness and hers. They seemed suited to each other. The family would have liked it. But see how she treats him. She gives him no answer—that I know from Sally; Sally is getting hot about it. She wants to keep him still in her train; but out of sight with her is out of mind. He has gone back to his work, and now, for want of better amusement, she is trying to get Sir Humphrey away from you! Oh, Miss Lynne, don’t let her! don’t let her! She would make him miserable. He knows what a good, true, unselfish woman is like. It would be terrible for him to be tied to a selfish, frivolous, heartless—”

Stella stopped suddenly, for Esther’s astonished gaze was bent upon her. If a pet dove had suddenly turned into a wild hawk, the astonishment felt by Esther could scarcely have been greater. Her face was just a little pale, but there was no anger in her expression, only a great, questioning surprise. Stella suddenly flung herself at her old friend’s feet.

“Oh, forgive me if I am saying what I have no right to say,

The Niece of Esther Lynne

but do just watch and be on your guard. I know how beautiful she is, and how fascinating to most people ; but oh, that is just the danger ! I do not know whether she means it or can help it ; but she has a genius for self-gratification, and you are so good ! so good ! Oh, Miss Lynne, don't be angry with me. I know it must sound ridiculous from me ; but if I have made a mistake about self-sacrifice and renunciation—and I begin to think I have—don't, don't yourself give up everything for Di. She is not worth it—indeed, she is not. Any man would do for her, who had money and brains and a career. Success is all she cares for—a name and a position, and to be admired and courted. Oh, don't give up Sir Humphrey to her. She does not care for him really. She has no true understanding of him. It is just that she must be first with everyone ; and he is so very kind and delightful and fascinating in his way. Do please be on your guard, and forgive me. You have never had anything all your life, and she has had so much—so much. Don't let her have this, too ; and please, please forgive me for saying all this ! But I met them out riding as I came, and I saw how it was with her, and it seemed to set my heart on fire. Now I am going ; please don't be very angry with me, but just watch. You will see—I am afraid you will see. But don't let her have all her own way. It isn't fair—it isn't good for her. And, oh, we do all so want to see you happy at last !”

The girl was gone before Esther could recover herself to make reply. She sat very still and quiet, with the pictured face before her, those steadfast eyes seeming to probe into hers with a half-smile, whilst the firm lips were grave and sweet. It was the face of her youthful lover, matured and grown stronger and nobler. It was a face to trust—a face to rest content with, a face upon which it was good to look. But was it the face of a man easily hoodwinked, easily cajoled, easily deceived ? She thought not.

Stella's words had struck her almost like a blow. She

herself had not been ignorant of the failings in Di's character—failings of which the girl herself was by no means unaware, and of which she spoke sometimes with the touch of humility which always went to Esther's heart. But she had not known that others saw them so plainly—that they were discussed between the girls, her companions, that hard things were spoken of her, and unworthy actions and motives attributed. That was what hurt; and it hurt the more that the imputations were not altogether undeserved. The sting of the whole thing lay there; and Esther passed a strange day, scarcely opening a book or touching a pen, her ears all on the alert for the sounds of returning horse-hoofs. She grew so restless that she could not remain upstairs as she had intended, but betook herself to the warm and cosy boudoir, where she presently rang for tea. But before the tray had been brought she heard the clear tones of Diana's voice calling gaily to some companion:

“Ah, but come in—do! I'll give you a cosy cup of tea. I can really make it as well as Esther—if you can believe me. And you shall tell me some more of your fascinating tales. Perhaps, by-and-by, I'll take you upstairs to see Esther, and you shall assure her that Conqueror is really capable of carrying Conquest. But we will get our tea first—I'm just dying for a cup. We've had a splendid day! That's right, come in!” Then the door was flung open, and Diana, in her splashed habit, advanced into the room, and stopped short, exclaiming, “Why, here she is herself—Esther is in evidence to answer for her own sins and shortcomings. Esther, darling, I have just insisted upon giving Sir Humphrey his tea; but it will be ten times more refreshing if you will give it to us both. I'll just take my ease, and you shall do everything. You are sure you are fit to be down?”

Next minute Sir Humphrey was holding Esther's hand and asking anxiously after her. She looked up to meet the kindly glance of those friendly eyes, and the tremor and trouble of

her heart was insensibly quieted. Diana had tossed off her hat, and was stretched in one of her easy, graceful attitudes in a deep easy-chair. The firelight danced and flickered over her trim figure in the well-cut habit, and the deep, golden lights and shadows of her hair. Her eyes were bright and very watchful as they rested upon the pair opposite. She let them both wait upon her and attend to her wants as a matter of course, she watching them the while with a flicker of amusement in her eyes.

"We have had a delightful day, and Sir Humphrey is charming," she remarked. "I really think he has a better seat than the Squire; and I can't say more than that! My horse is perfection, and I think I've convinced the Squire that I can ride. He'll take me with him to the first meet, and I'm going shooting with him, whether he likes it or not. Sally mayn't shoot—Lady Caroline has put her foot down there. Poor Sally is awfully riled, but consoles herself with hockey. She won't ever ride to hounds, you know. She uses up her father's old hunters when they are not up to his weight any longer, and cuts about by herself, joining the run when she chooses, and making her own line. She says she looks a fright on horseback, and hates the flummery of the meet. But she can stick on over everything, though she looks like a sack of potatoes on a horse. Poor old Sal! It's too bad to laugh at her; she's a real good sort. But how she came to be such an ungainly creature I can't imagine!"

They told Esther of the day's doings. Diana had a charming way of drawing out Sir Humphrey, and making him talk. She had learnt more about himself and his own doings than anybody else, and they had little jokes and mutual understandings of their own, which evoked many a peal of laughter as they talked. Diana always explained to Esther the meaning of any such hidden jest, and Esther had never hitherto thought of herself in any way as an outsider when they were all together. But to-day (was it that she was a little tired and

not quite up to the mark?) she found herself wondering whether she were in any sense of the word *de trop*—or whether they would have enjoyed their tea more had she remained upstairs.

She put the thought away. Never did any bitter or repining sentiment flourish in that gentle and unselfish heart.

Di's clear voice was saying joyously as she bid Sir Humphrey adieu :

"The summer is over, to be sure. I thought I should be sorry when it went ; but, really, I think autumn is going to be just as charming in its way !"

Summer over ! The words fell upon Esther's ears somewhat strangely as she sat alone in the dusk. Their guest had left. Di had gone to change her dress, and she sat alone over the fire.

Was summer gone indeed—never to return ?

CHAPTER XXI

SHOOTING—AND MISCHIEF

ESTHER's face showed that she did not quite like it ; her expression was slightly disturbed and anxious. Diana saw it, and laughed gaily, turning herself round for inspection with that confidence in her own appearance and the perfection of her appointments which was natural to her, and which scarcely seemed to savour of vanity, it was so thoroughly matter-of-course.

Busvine had cut the short, workmanlike coat and skirt ; Heath was responsible for the dainty and most becoming cap. Everything was perfect in its way—and the latest thing out—down to the light shot-gun, whose shining barrel seemed so strangely out of place in Esther's old-world room, which at all seasons seemed to smell of rose-leaves and lavender, and to wear its peculiar aspect of peace and stillness. Esther was still a good deal upstairs. Her strength was not equal to too many demands, and her old friend, the doctor of the place, told her, in his rather bluff fashion, that her charming niece had been just a little too much for her these past months, and that she had overdrawn slightly upon her reserves of strength. She could not quite get rid of her cough, and though she went out most days, and came down to meals and for the evening, she was not altogether sorry to be counselled to spend a certain number of hours upstairs in the quiet of her own room, leaving Di and her merry young friends, who had now got into the way of making Convent House a sort of centre, to entertain themselves below, enjoying the distant sounds of their gay voices,

but not always joining them, save, perhaps, for a brief time to dispense the hospitalities of the tea-table.

Not infrequently she found Sir Humphrey there ; continually Archie Vanborough was one of the party, and, more occasionally, Colonel York, whose friendship with Esther herself had become an unexpected factor in his life. Diana used laughingly to declare that Convent House must really take the bachelors of Nun's Bower upon its mind during the dull winter days, or else the wretched men-folk would betake themselves to London and club-land in sheer despair. So far, however, those bachelors had appeared entirely contented with their quarters and with their surroundings, and though they very readily availed themselves of the easy hospitality accorded them, showed no disposition towards London life, save that Archie was more or less backwards and forwards, though it was wonderful how he kept returning to his kinsman's house, as though drawn thither by a magnet.

And now sport was all the talk, and the prospect of pheasant shooting and hunting occupied the masculine mind a good deal, to the exclusion of other matters ; and Esther Lynne was just a little aghast to discover that Di intended to accompany the sportsmen, just as she intended to follow the hounds when the hunting should commence.

And now, clad in her workmanlike clothes, which her height and her graceful proportions made eminently becoming to her, she presented herself before her aunt, and lightly pirouetted round her to show herself off.

"I know you don't quite like it, you old-fashioned darling ; but you know you took me 'for better—for wuss' when I thrust myself upon you, and I warned you you'd got rather a handful with your bargain ! I can't stay at home when all the world is out ; and I can't make hockey the aim and object of my life as Sally does. I'm a modern-day product, and must live as such. You may be very thankful I don't insist on smoking cigarettes in the drawing-room. I do consider your

feelings to that extent, Esther. When I smoke, I do it in private. So be thankful for small mercies."

Esther was looking at her with her gentle luminous gaze, which somehow expressed so much more, both of love and of misgiving, than her lips were wont to speak. Diana felt that something underlay the significance of that glance, and dropping a light kiss on Esther's brow, asked laughingly:

"Well, and what would you like to say, if you dared, O most sapient and cautious mentor?"

"I scarcely know how to put it, my darling; only I am so anxious for your happiness—your best and truest happiness. And sometimes I am half afraid you will trifle with it, or throw it away—without really knowing what you are doing."

There was a laughing light in Diana's eyes.

"You sweet, old-fashioned thing! You are just like a revival of Cranford or Jane Austen. You think I am not 'elegant female' enough to please the taste of the men-folk! Your idea is that a girl must get a husband before she can be really happy; and you are afraid I am not going the right way to work! But I assure you, you darling creature, that husbands are by no means the aim and object of our lives. I'm not sure that the surest way of having a good time all round, and steering clear of worries and bothers and troubles of all sorts, isn't to keep matrimony at arm's-length. Anyhow, this child is in no hurry to find a mate: so don't you worry about that! Sally and I will set up as two old maids together, and rent Nun's Bower from Sir Humphrey—when he doesn't want it any longer. So long, Esther!" and Di vanished with a peal of silvery laughter, leaving her words with respect to Nun's Bower unexplained, though they had brought up a quick involuntary flush to Esther's face.

Diana marched away, carrying her gun in the hollow of her arm, in a fashion which showed her well used to the use of that weapon. She was in gay mood, and was laughing inwardly the while. A spirit of mischief possessed her. She was just a

trifle piqued by Esther's words. She had spoken the truth in measure when she said that she was in no haste to wed ; but she had no intention of remaining permanently a spinster. She knew enough of the world to be aware that the position she desired to hold there would not be easily attained by an unmarried woman, even though she might have a handsome fortune and a plentiful dower of good looks and assurance. The short cut to the position she desired to occupy was a suitable marriage, afterwards launching herself upon the gay tide of fashion and politics, where, with her own gifts and the prestige of such a husband as she should select, she might hope to cut a figure and fill a place such as she desired to do. But she had not yet made up her mind as to the partner she should select ; and as she sped along she spoke half aloud in a smiling soliloquy.

"Sir Humphrey would really be a good man for the part. I should love to be my lady—there is a good sound about Lady Vanborough—and perhaps, if the oracle were worked aright, we could get him made a baronet or even a peer in time. I should be presented at Court, of course. I should make my way by leaps and bounds ; and there is something particularly fascinating about him. I am never bored in his company. I behave better with him than with most ; and then it would not, in all probability, be a contract that would last long enough for me to get too much bored by.

"There are such things as laws of nature, and without meaning anything brutal or unkind, or desiring his dear old life shortened by a day, I should most likely be left a widow in the prime of my life, with an assured position and a handsome income ; and that is not a thing to be sneezed at. I'm awfully fond of the old dear. I would make him a most charming wife. I should be an old man's darling, as the saying is, and I really think I should play the part with spirit and grace. It's really worth considering seriously. It doesn't do to trifle with a situation too long. It's pretty plain that he and Esther are

going to content themselves with a platonic friendship for the rest of their days; and really, I believe that they have judged wisely and well for themselves. If he were to marry, he ought to marry a wife who would push him on, who would make him young again, who would brighten him up and trot him round, and keep him from getting fossilised. That's just where Esther would fail him. They would settle down as two old fogies together, placidly happy, perhaps; but I'm not so sure even of that.

"Changes and excitements don't altogether suit Esther. She is showing that very plainly. It would be delightful for her to have us often down at Convent House, and for her to play a sort of fairy godmother part to us; but she isn't fit for any other rôle, that's self-evident. And I really think I might be doing a kindness to make up Sir Humphrey's mind for him, if the dear old chap is in any difficulty about making it up for himself."

Musing thus, and with the light of mischief dancing in her eyes, Diana came upon the shooting-party at the appointed spot. She heard the Squire's booming voice before she came in sight of the speaker. He was holding forth in the fashion she loved to hear.

"Sport, sir! I tell you, sport in the old-fashioned sense of the word in which we use it—and our fathers used it before us—is almost a dead letter now. We used to make up a party, a few good guns—not too many—a few good dogs who knew their business, and one's own beaters when they were wanted, and be content with a decent bag at the end, and not grumble at a good tramp to get it. All that's out of date now, I tell you. You'll meet huge brakes or wagonettes crammed with 'bounders' (as the lads call them) from the towns, or fellows who have made a pile in trade, and think to play the country gentleman, who scarcely know one end of a gun from the other. You'll see them going out in gangs in their carriages, and they'll have some hundreds of half-tame birds driven

across their guns, and, I tell you, it's like a field day at Aldershot to hear them; you'd think you'd come into a mock battle by the sound of the volleys—you'd never guess, I say, that it was pheasant shooting. Sport, you call it! I call it barn-door butchery; and I often wonder how long it'll be before these fellows take to shooting old hens out of their own yards! I declare, it wouldn't be a bit more unsportsmanlike than the things they do now. Fire across high-roads, frighten horses—anything, it don't matter what, so long as they feel that they're playing the country gentleman, and killing something. And then the birds go into the market to be sold—faugh! it makes one sick. I declare, if things go on much longer as they're going now, I'll never fire a gun again myself! They take the flavour out of everything with their disgusting, modern, vulgar ways. Sport, indeed! they don't know what sport is! Our fathers would turn in their graves to see what was going on now. I often feel like turning in my own."

Diana's clear laugh rang out at this point, as she swung lightly into their midst. She had threatened to join the party, but they had not quite believed she meant it. Archie had entreated her to come, but the others had been reticent. And now the Squire looked her well over with drawn brows and something between a grunt and a snort. He was very fond of Di. He regarded her in some sort as the girl his son was likely to marry, and whom he hoped he would choose. It was perhaps rather odd that, with his pronounced Tory views, he should have taken so strong a liking to so very modern a product as Diana Conquest; but the Squire was no freer from inconsistencies than the rest of the world, and the girl stood high in his favour.

"Well, young madam, if you were a daughter of mine you'd be sent home double quick with a flea in your ear. But since you are not my property, and the responsibility of you rests with Miss Lynne—"

"Ah, no, Squire. Don't put that grievous burden upon poor darling Esther. I assure you she doesn't approve of me in the least. But, you see, ruling me wasn't in the bargain when I took the Convent House by storm. I'm the only person responsible for my evil self and all my naughty ways. But really, when you see me shoot I think you'll forgive me."

Sir Humphrey regarded her with a lenient smile. He had seen modern women in India—women with whom Di's modernity compared very favourably. He had knocked about the world too much to get into any special groove, or to draw hard-and-fast lines as to what was or was not to be done. He realised fully that it was generally not the thing which was done, but how it was done, which made it objectionable or the reverse. He had known women who could make tea-table conversation or a ballroom dance a thing of horror, whilst others could display a daring audacity without suggesting a thought of harm.

Diana saw the smile and returned it, and attached herself to Sir Humphrey's side, in so far as they were able to walk together. The Squire was master of the ceremonies, and there were seven guns in all, Diana being the seventh; and they saw some very pretty shooting as the day went on, in which the girl acquitted herself so well, and with such a sportsmanlike quickness, dexterity, and understanding of the unwritten laws of the game, that the Squire could not but be mollified, and Archie was delighted. Her bag was as good as that of anyone, and at lunch she was, as ever, the life and soul of the party.

When dusk fell, they found themselves at some distance from home. Archie was claimed by a party of sportsmen with whom they had fallen in on the confines of the Squire's property, and who insisted on carrying him off to dine and sleep with them. The Squire himself had business to do at this far end of the estate, and excused himself to attend to the representations of a farmer tenant, who wanted to show

him certain matters. It was the most natural thing in the world for Di to tramp homewards beside Sir Humphrey, discussing the day's doings in animated fashion, and making him laugh again and again with her droll mimicry of one or another of the younger men who had formed their party.

Di could be a very charming companion when she chose to be so; and now she did choose. She had noted, with her habitual quickness of intuition, to-day, both with their own party and with that with which they had fallen in later, that Sir Humphrey was a distinct personage in the world in which he moved. Young men treated him with deference. It was easy to see that he was admired, courted even, and that his notice was regarded as a favour and distinction.

Rudolf had said something of this before. She was beginning to see it more and more plainly. If he chose, Sir Humphrey could be a man of mark in a bigger sphere and a wider world than the one in which he was content to move for the present. Insensibly she led the talk towards that subject. She spoke of London, of the way the world wagged there, of the men of note it contained who were known to him, and she was struck anew by the admissions which fell from him respecting his personal acquaintance with so many men of mark and rank. In India he had entertained all distinguished persons who visited his part of the country, and in return had been invited by them when he himself was on furlough.

The girl's eyes dilated as she realised that this man could at a moment's notice, if he so chose to do so, float himself and his wife upon just such a tide as that whereon she longed to launch her own bark. Great houses would be open to them; they would be courted and fêted wherever they went. That gay, palpitating world of which she had had brief glimpses would become her own natural sphere, where she would have her own part to play—as Lady Vanborough.

Her quick mind was leaping forward ; her eyes had kindled ; her cheek had flushed. She exclaimed suddenly :

"Oh, why don't you go—why don't you go? What are you doing here?"

He looked at her with a smile in his eyes. Naturally he had not followed her train of thought. His own had been wandering off in other directions. He had to ask her to explain herself. She did so earnestly and almost vehemently.

"Why, don't you understand? You ought not just to be vegetating here. You are not an old man. You have a place in the world. You might be a power there. You might do things. You might be things. Oh, I should love to see you there. You might be such a king amongst men. You cannot be content to settle down at Cleethorpe. The voice of the world is always calling upon its good men. Can't you hear it calling upon you?"

He looked at her then with a smile in his eyes—that kindly and comprehending smile which she knew and loved.

"What do you know about that voice, child?"

"Oh, I can hear it myself. I have ears, too. I just long to be a man—to go forth at its bidding. I could have done such things."

"Do you think it is only men who can do great things in the world, my dear? Do you think the world does not want its good women, too, perhaps even more than its men?"

"Oh, I don't know—I don't know. I am fond of talking big about what women can do ; but when it comes to trying conclusions with life, we find ourselves awfully, frightfully handicapped. I don't know how or why it is ; but the fact remains."

Sir Humphrey stroked his moustache thoughtfully, looking straight before him the while.

"Woman's sphere is different from man's—that is very true ; and, for my part, I am old-fashioned enough not to wish too many changes in that direction. I would not compete with

woman; I would hold her as infinitely, immeasurably above me, to be cherished, looked up to, revered. Ah, my dear, you are, perhaps, too young to estimate as yet what power a good woman holds in her hands, and what she can be as a motive power for good to the man whose heart safely trusts in her—the man who loves her.”

He spoke the last two words very softly, rather dreamily, and with an infinite tenderness; at the same moment, as though by an instinct he was half unconscious of, he bared his head. Diana knew in that moment that he was thinking of Esther Lynne, and a strange and quite unexpected and incomprehensible jealousy filled her heart. Perhaps, unconsciously to herself, she had come nearer to loving Sir Humphrey than she knew. Or else the passion for mastery in her nature had been stirred to sudden life.

Her eyes sparkled rather dangerously beneath the long lashes; but her voice was very gentle as she made answer.

“I think I partly understand what you mean—because I know Esther. She is the sort of woman one feels that about. But, Sir Humphrey, have you ever considered what it takes out of a woman to lead that sort of saintlike life—giving all, asking for nothing again? I tell you, Esther has just killed herself with it. It is not cold she is suffering from—that is, only just one little symptom. It is the strain of trying to pull herself out of the groove in which her life has been running all these years. At first, when I came to her, I urged her to do it. I thought it would be for her good. It seemed so hard that she had never had life as we mean it when we use the word. But now I see that I was wrong—that others have been wrong, too. If we do not care we shall kill her amongst us—and we shall only know it when it is too late!”

A startled look crossed Sir Humphrey's face. “What do you mean?” he asked.

“I mean that we must let Esther alone. We must not try to change her life too much. She is like a sweet lavender

bush—or anything else that is tender and fragrant and old-fashioned that you choose to liken her to—the darling. Left alone in her quiet corner, she will flourish still, and shed sweetness round her upon all who approach. But we must not try to transplant her—to change the habits and methods of a lifetime, to rouse her to a new life—even though it may seem to be one of greater pleasure—one she so well deserves. Oh I know that I am not one who ought to talk. I have been the worst of all ; for I was quite determined that she should have a lovely time, after all she had been through, and should not settle down as just a regular old maid—though the sweetest sort they make of the kind. But I have had to give in at last. Now, as you know, I am keeping her away from things. It is doctor's orders, of course ; but I shouldn't care a red cent for them, if I didn't see that we were half killing her amongst us. That's what comes of being one of the saints of the earth. You have to pay for it. But I'm not going to let Esther pay for it with her life, if I can help it ; and if she has to vegetate and live very quietly again this winter, I'll be hermetically sealed up with her and keep her company: But I don't like that transparent, ethereal look she is getting—not one little bit. And I mean to put a stop so far as I can to the conditions which have created it."

He walked on, looking straight before him like a man in a dream.

"You mean you think that Esther Lynne would suffer in health from—from—well, I mean from any condition which would too much upset and alter those under which she has been living so long."

"I think it would just kill her," said Diana concisely ; "and that we have some of us quite innocently begun the killing process already."

Sir Humphrey did not speak again until they parted almost at the gates of Convent House, nor would he come in, though pressed to do so. His farewell was spoken in a more distrai

way than was usual with him ; and Diana, after bidding him adieu, turned to watch him go, and marked his bent head and air of abstraction, a little gleam of malicious amusement in her eyes.

“ I think I have put a spoke in your wheel,” she remarked. “ I am not going to let you throw yourself away even on dear old Esther, not if I can help it.”

CHAPTER XXII

DREAR NOVEMBER

WITH the rapid shortening of the days, and with the chill and rain of November, Sir Humphrey Vanborough's visits to Convent House became fewer and more irregular. A sweet, patient wistfulness began to mingle with the serenity of Esther's glance, and to shine in the depths of those liquid brown eyes. But no sense of injury or jealousy could find entrance into her faithful heart and tender thoughts of the two whom she loved best in the world. She only said to herself: "He meets her so often elsewhere. They shoot together and hunt. He does not need to find her out here as of old. I pray God they may be very happy together! If she will but give him the true love of her ardent young heart, she will be indeed a happy woman. He will make her the best and truest and tenderest of husbands. I should fear for Di were she tempted by a marriage of worldly splendour and ambition; but there can be nothing of that in her thoughts of Humphrey. His career in a sense is ended. A quiet, peaceful end to a life of strenuous work is what he is looking forward to. Idle or useless he will never be; but a smaller sphere will content him, and those quieter joys of domesticity which he has never tasted yet. It will be a safe life for her, and a happy one. Ah, I will be glad for them both—I will indeed! Their happiness is the dearest wish I have left in the world. When I have seen that consummated, I can say my *Nunc Dimittis* with a joyful heart."

For there were times when Esther began to feel herself

suddenly old—not exactly from physical failing, though she had been a little over-strained and run down latterly, but rather as one whose life's history is done with, and the book ready to be closed. She knew she was not really old—that many years of useful life probably stretched before her ; and yet in spite of this knowledge there was a sense upon her of a full stop—of a blank wall rising up, as it were, of the closing for ever of her life's story. She did not seek to analyse closely ; her nature was not introspective, and she had long schooled herself to take joy and pain alike from the hands of the Heavenly Father without murmur or revolt. Yet the feeling weighed somewhat upon her, bringing a tender wistfulness into her eyes ; and Diana saw it, chafed beneath it, till her mood alternated between fits of wild spirits and days of restlessness and feverish energy, which perplexed Esther, and made her question sometimes whether all were quite well with the girl.

Diana in those days made great show of affection for Esther. She would caress her vehemently—almost roughly sometimes—calling her by a hundred odd terms of endearment. She watched over her with something of a dragon-like authority, insisting upon her resting much, not exposing herself to fatigue or cold, and not being worried with too much company.

“ Dr. Ballard says you have been overdone ; and I know he thinks it's my fault. You were quite well till I came, and I stirred you up with a long pole—and see the result. Now I'm going to get you round again. I won't have it said that I've killed you, or am going the way to do it. You were a perfect darling. You gave us all a lovely summer. I never had a better all-round time in my life ; but if it's going to be the death of you, we'll never have such another.”

It was useless for Esther to protest that the summer gaieties could not have had much to do with it. Diana had made up her mind, and that was the end of it. The girl herself was

out all weathers, and most days, coming home in the dusk, wet and dirty, but bright-eyed and full of animation, whilst the hour she spent retailing her adventures to Esther over the fire and a cosy cup of tea was the happiest one in the day for her. Esther ceased to ask why Sir Humphrey did not come. She supposed, of course, that he was wet and tired, and preferred to go straight home. It was quite natural that the dark, damp evenings did not tempt him out as the bright ones of summer had done. It was all perfectly natural and right, and Esther tried to hide even from herself the little shadow which his absence, and the cessation of that pleasant, easy, almost daily intercourse, cast athwart her sky, or the blank which it left in her life. She quite understood how it came about that she saw less of him ; and she heard of him constantly from Diana, from Sally, and from Stella. Both of the latter paid her frequent visits, and cheered her much by their gay or affectionate talk. Stella's portrait of Sir Humphrey was growing steadily towards completion. He gave her sittings as they were needed, and the girl was throwing herself into her task with a heartiness and an enthusiasm which were having marked results in breaking through her little crust of conscious self-righteousness, and was making her at once more lovable and more human.

Her real duties were still punctually and diligently performed. But she had gradually ceased heaping upon herself—or allowing others to heap upon her (to their own detriment) offices which she was in no wise called upon to undertake. She was learning that she could be a clergyman's daughter—and a useful one, too—without “having her finger in every pie,” as Sally used glibly to phrase it. Moreover, she had with some spirit turned upon Sally, and insisted upon her doing something towards relieving her of a few small offices which the latter could perfectly well undertake and perform if she would. Sally had grumbled and scoffed at the outset ; but York had backed Stella, and had told Sally pretty plainly

that life was not made simply and solely to be spent in the playground.

Sally had a great secret admiration for the soldier, crippled in his country's cause, and bearing his infirmity without a murmur or a sign of impatience. She had given in when he joined forces with Stella, and now the girl was finding that it really was rather interesting, and not without its element of amusement, this visiting at outlying cottages and bringing sunshine in her wake. She brought other things, too, in a rather stealthy and surreptitious fashion, for Stella was always preaching against pauperising the people. But Sally's gifts were too quaint and original in character for that, generally consisting of little contrivances of her own planning to keep out a draught, to cure a smoky chimney, to keep an enterprising, crawling baby in bounds, and so forth. The carpenter's shop on her father's property saw her more and more, and the hockey field somewhat less. But for all that she was finding life more full of interest than of old, and she fraternised with Stella over matters about which heretofore she had been either absolutely indifferent or slightly hostile.

They were neither of them seeing much of Diana just now. She was too much absorbed in the pursuits in which they did not join. Sally, to be sure, when the hounds met in the locality, would mount her sagacious old horse, set out "on her own hook," as she phrased it, and manage to see something of the run, and do a bit of exciting following on her own account; but she never consorted with the rest of the field—not even with her friends. She liked to be a free lance in the company. She knew that her riding, like most other things about her, was somewhat ungainly. She never dressed for the saddle like other girls. She liked to be able to jump off and ease her horse, or go scrambling with him up or down some risky declivity. She often watched Di from afar—saw how courted and popular and admired she was. She would tell

Esther Lynne of her niece's prowess in the field—not that Di was reticent herself on this point, though she possessed the happy knack of being able to talk of her own exploits without appearance of bragging of them—for she noted that it always gave her pleasure to hear these things. She and Stella paid very regular visits to Convent House at this time, knowing how much Di was away; and sometimes walking homewards together, Sally would “let fly,” as she called it, with her customary candour.

“I think Di is behaving like a brute!” she flashed out one day, quite suddenly. “She makes such a fuss over Miss Lynne, calls her darling, and sweetest, and all sorts of sugary names, but never thinks of giving up a single day's pleasuring to be with her! On a wet, miserable day, when a bright fire and an amusing book seem more to her taste than a tramp or a ride, she'll be there, making great show of her devotion; but I wonder Miss Lynne don't see through her! When it comes to giving up a single thing she wants to do—no fear!”

Stella looked rather wonderingly at Sally, for she was speaking with an unwonted vehemence.

“I thought you were so fond of Di?” she said, with a query in her voice; for though Sally had made remarks before, it was rather more in a joking than a serious fashion.

“So I am—in a way. There's something about her that gets hold of you. You want to be looking at her all the time when she's there. I want to hear what she says—and she's been so nice to me, too. We quite chummed up for a goodish bit, and we're chums in a way still; but I've got eyes in my head, and I see how things are going. Sometimes I believe I shall up and out with it to Di herself—whether she likes it, or whether she don't!”

“What do you mean?” asked Stella, who felt that there was an under-significance in Sally's words which she had not fully grasped.

"Well, I'll not just say exactly what I do mean, if you haven't seen it for yourself," she answered. "I don't hold with saying behind a fellow's back what you don't say to his face. I'll have it out with Di herself one of these days. Then, perhaps, I'll tell you. Of course, I may be wrong, but I don't think I am."

Sally's opportunity was not long in coming, for Lady Caroline, her mother, had resolved to give a little dance to the neighbourhood, by way of enlivening the rather dreary November days, and as dances were not very common in Cleethorpe, it caused a little flutter of excitement through the place.

Sally frankly hated it all. She declined to dance at any price, but promised to do her best to keep things going, introduce the men who would come down from town with Rudolf—specially invited for the occasion, though he could only spare a couple of days—to the girls of the place, and look after the younger section of the guests generally.

Diana was in great spirits. The dance—it was not on a scale large enough to be dignified by the name of a ball—would be a welcome break in the monotony of the long evenings, which were beginning to pall upon her to a very considerable extent. She could not imagine why Sir Humphrey so seldom came in now. He was not a man to fear weather, or to be tied to his own fireside after dark, as Esther fancied. Di was growing somewhat restless and impatient. She had almost made up her mind to accepting Sir Humphrey Vanborough. She began to feel herself almost in love with him. A day when she had not seen him seemed blank and colourless. When they were together she monopolised him, and fancied that he monopolised her. She took his escort in the hunting-field for granted.

Though nominally under the care of the Squire, she was much more with Sir Humphrey, and she was perfectly well aware that the neighbourhood was expecting some *dénouement*

before long. There were days when she had declared to herself that she would bring matters to a crisis before night—and yet the crisis had never come. Always friendly, courteous, treating her with an old-world chivalry which appealed to her as both charming and picturesque, he never crossed the line of demarcation betwixt friendship and love. Yet it did not seriously occur to Di that it would be possible for a man to resist her, if she made up her mind to his subjugation, and the very difficulty she was finding piqued her to a stronger determination. Already it almost seemed to her as though she had never cared for anyone else, and would never care for anybody again.

So her mood was fluctuating and variable, and high spirits alternated with fits of brooding or of restlessness, and flashes of irritability which perplexed and pained Esther, who began to doubt her ability to make the girl happy with her. Yet the more she knew of Di, the more she felt concerned at the mere thought of her taking her life into her own hands, and living it in some independent fashion of her own.

But the prospect of the little dance brought a change with it. Di was excited and amused, and she gave herself over to the mysteries of re-modelling one of her London dresses (which hitherto had been little worn) with an energy and interest which amused Esther, but which carried her along with it.

Esther had decided herself not to go to the dance, and Di had assented to this prudent resolve with resignation, though apparent regret.

"I would have loved to have you there; but if it knocked you up or gave you cold afterwards, I should be so grieved. I can stay at the Hall. They have asked me to do that, to help to entertain the house-party. I shan't want for a chaperon, and I dare say you will really be happier at home, hearing all about it from me afterwards."

So Di went, and Esther stayed behind, content to be

regarded as one past the gaieties of youth. But Di was resolved to be the person of the first consequence that night, to dazzle, to captivate, to carry all before her; and the culminating point of triumph for her was to be the final subjugation of Sir Humphrey Vanborough.

The evening came—and the evening passed. Di, in her floating diaphanous draperies, was undoubted queen of the ceremonies. She looked her best; she had a regular court about her all the while. She was vivacious, racy, piquant, and charming; but she took care that her brightest smiles, her merriest sallies, and her most bewitching advances were reserved for Sir Humphrey. It was he who danced the cotillion with her after supper, professing his utter ignorance of the dance and its figures, but suffering himself to be instructed by his partner.

It was with him that Di vanished afterwards into the conservatory, not emerging thence until half of the guests had taken their departure, and then escaping to her room without saying good-night to anyone. Her face was flushed, her eyes were extraordinarily bright; but when she reached her room, she began tearing off her finery with rough hands, careless how she injured the filmy textures in which she had taken such pride and pleasure; and having pulled off her ball-dress, she snatched a thick walking-gown out of the wardrobe, as though she meant to don that. But then, as the clock in the tower overhead boomed out the hour of two, she suddenly broke into a short laugh, flung it back into the cupboard, and subsided in a heap upon the rug before the fire, her dishevelled hair, half unfastened by her rapid movements, falling in a golden mass about her face.

The door slowly opened, and in came Sally with a tray; Sally in her plain, white dress, which, in its unwonted length, and with its elbow sleeves and open neck veiled in filmy lace, gave a touch of grace to the girl's angular and square figure, which at no other time was visible; she came in slowly with her

burden, and put it down on a little table, saying in rather an odd voice :

“Mother was so sorry you did not stay for some soup. It is two hours since you had supper, and she was afraid you were overdone. I said I’d take it myself. I wanted to see you, Di—and to see you to-night. I want to have it over. It’s got to be said—or I shall—I shall—burst with it. It may be no business of mine—I don’t care. I’m not going to keep my mouth shut. I stood by quiet when you did your level best to get Rudolf away from Stella—and succeeded ; though I don’t believe now you mean to marry him. I believe you are playing fast and loose with him to amuse yourself. But when you set yourself to get Sir Humphrey away from Miss Lynne—that I won’t stand in silence.

“I didn’t care so long as it was just your flirting with him—trying to bewitch and captivate him honestly—for I knew he was a man who had the sense to look below, and that Miss Lynne would always stand first with him. But when you go telling tarradiddles about her—putting him off with horrid little mean half-truths—keep him away from her, that you may make the running yourself !—Di, I am ashamed for you ! I hate to think any woman can be so mean—so small. I’d never have guessed it of you. I wouldn’t really have believed it at all, if I hadn’t heard you myself ! People had said things. Archie asked me questions which set me wondering. I’ve had suspicions before, and I’ve meant to have it out with you. But till to-night I’ve never been quite, quite sure that there mightn’t have been some mistake. But now I know there hasn’t. Di, do you know you’ve been a beast ? ”

The final question was flashed out just in Sally’s old style. Up till then she had spoken with unusual sobriety and quite unusual fluency. Diana had never heard so long a speech pass her lips before. She sat back on her heels, staring mutely at her, the colour rising hot in her face at first, and then ebbing slowly away.

By the time Sally wound up with the familiar and inelegant word, Di had somewhat recovered from her first astonishment and indignation at being taken to task. Something in the direct frankness and unflinching aspect of the girl before her appealed to the more generous side of her nature. She looked full at her, and asked :

“What do you mean? What have you heard?”

“I was in the conservatory when you and Sir Humphrey came in. I was almost asleep. That rubbishy cotillion had given me breathing time. When I woke up you were talking together. I never thought of such things as secrets between you—I’ve heard you talking a dozen times, and I was very sleepy and not taking in much, till suddenly I knew that he was asking about Miss Lynne—something you had said to him before about her. Archie had told me that Sir Humphrey had the idea that Miss Lynne was overdone by so much to-ing and fro-ing between Convent House and Nun’s Bower. I told him it was all rubbish; that it was her greatest pleasure; but you know what you told him to-night, Di. You know what you meant—and so do I. You are just trying to get him away from Miss Lynne, whom he has loved all his life; you are trying all you know to make him love you and propose to you. And when he does it, you will play with him a little, and then get tired of him, and fling him aside like an old glove, and go off after somebody else—you will serve him just as you have served Rudolf! You have no heart. I think you are like Undine—without a soul. And you don’t care how many hearts you break and wreck—so long as you are amused—and are the first with everybody!”

Diana had risen slowly to her feet. Her eyes were glowing strangely. Sally did not know whether the girl might not fly at her like a tiger; yet she faced her without flinching. But the words, when they came, surprised her both by their briefness and by the tone in which they were spoken.

“You, too, Sally!”

There was a tense silence between them. Sally was the first to speak.

"What do you mean, Di?"

"Only that you are repeating what I have heard before. I suppose history has a way of repeating itself. Can I help it?" The girl broke out now almost passionately. "I believe I am made like that! It has always been the same. I first make friends wherever I go—and then I make enemies. They turn against me. How can I help it if the boys—the men—will come after me?"

"Sir Humphrey has never come after you—not in your sense!" cried Sally hotly. "He knew your mother—you are Miss Lynne's niece—and he has never had a thought for anyone but her! It is just that which you could not bear! You must have him, too! Oh! I have nothing much to say about the young men—not even Rudolf—though I do think you have treated him very badly. Stella was aggravating. She irritated and provoked him—she has owned up now. And then you came, and I can understand it all very well. It was natural and all that, and he ought to know enough of the game to take his luck. But Sir Humphrey—and Miss Lynne! That is what I can't get over. You have just tried to come between them, whether you know it or not. And yet all the time you profess to love her—"

"I do love her!" cried Di, catching her breath.

"You don't—you only love yourself. What you call love for other people is only a sort of make-believe. You care for Miss Lynne because you like the ease and comfort of Convent House, and to be looked after by her, and petted and spoiled by everybody. You don't care *that* for her herself, or you could not—you *could* not try to come between her and her happiness—her and her love. You may think it ridiculous that men and women can love faithfully all those years; but other people don't. No; I don't want to talk about it, I don't want to argue about it; I've had my say, and if you like

to quarrel with me you can. But if you have one spark of honour or love or principle left, you'll try to undo the mischief you have done. You'll let Miss Lynne and Sir Humphrey be happy together without holding them apart by your plotting and your—lies!"

Again the last word came out like a snap; and Sally, without a pause, turned and marched out from the room, holding up her head very stiff and high, whilst Diana looked after her rigid and motionless till the door closed sharply behind her, when she suddenly flung herself upon the bed, and broke into a storm of wild weeping.

CHAPTER XXIII

AN UNSEEN HAND

"WHAT was that?" cried Sally, stopping suddenly short.

"What?" asked Stella, pausing also, but unconscious of anything unwonted either in sight or sound.

But Sally had senses accentuated by her open-air life and love of woodland roving. Her ears were preternaturally sharp, and now she dashed forward, crying out :

"Something has happened ! I heard a scuffle, and, I think, a fall. Keep your eyes open, Stella ; follow me, and if you see anything, sing out."

Stella's heart was beating wildly. True, it was still almost broad daylight, though the dusk would fall rapidly now in the woods. It seemed scarcely the hour for poachers to be abroad ; yet, if Sally were right in what she surmised, what else could it be save some scuffle with poachers?

"Sally, what is it? Do you think we ought to go? What could we do if we got there?" she asked, following Sally's galloping steps with her lighter flying footfalls.

But Sally only cried :

"Come on ! come on ! Somebody may want our help !" And in a moment more she uttered a queer kind of yell, and made a dash, as it were, into the very heart of the thicket, shouting out to Stella : "Catch him ! catch him ! Ghost or no ghost, we'll nab him between us ! Yonder he goes ! Look sharp, Stella ! Head him off, can't you ? Great Jehoshaphat ! where has the beggar got to now ?"

Stella was mute with astonished bewilderment. Sally

seemed dashing after some phantom of her own creation. For one moment Stella did think she beheld something moving in the brushwood, something white and small, but she could not make nothing of it; probably it was a young owl fluttering along not far from the ground. But Sally was plunging and diving about in a wild and erratic fashion, only coming up at last breathless and panting, with a strangely baffled look upon her face.

"Made tracks—the beggar! But I declare I thought I'd beat anybody at that game! Did you see what it was, Stella?"

"No; I saw nothing!" Stella was shaking all over now, with the nervous terror which peril and mystery easily awaken in young girls. "What was it, Sally?"

"I believe it was that creature, whoever it may be, who was playing ghost round here last summer!"

"That was Diana."

"There was another, too. Di saw it, and so did Archie. After Di's escapade had set all the village talking and watching, the first ghost disappeared for a bit. I believe the beggar has come back now. I saw the white thing wrapped round its head; but I saw eyes as well—wicked, vicious-looking eyes, gleaming out of blackness! Where the creature's got to I can't imagine; but I can't wait to see now. He's been up to mischief of some sort. And I'm going to see what it was!"

"Oh, Sally, how do you know? Hadn't we better get help?"

"Yes, of course—if there's need. That's what we've got to find out. Come along this way. It wasn't far off where the scrimmage was. Here, don't you look so scared, you little goose! I've got my weapon. I'll defend you. Besides, the spook—or whatever it is—is well scared off by now. All we've got to do is to find out what he's been up to, and if any mischief has been done. Come on!"

And Sally dashed fearlessly forward, followed closely by

Stella, who felt anything preferable to being left by herself in the wood, where some mysterious and ghostly being might be lurking, bent upon mischief.

An exclamation from Sally, who kept a short lead, showed that she had made a discovery. Next minute Stella uttered a little sharp cry of fright and distress. Sir Humphrey Vanborough lay extended upon the ground at their feet, his white face turned up towards the sky, his eyes closed, his features rigid, and a stream of blood flowing from him, and dyeing the ground crimson.

In a moment Sally was on her knees beside him. Sally had been a sort of doctor to injured animals all her life. Blood did not affright her. Her nerves were well under control. Whenever there was something to be done, she had abundant capacity. Awkward and blundering she might be in a drawing-room, but when an emergency stared her in the face, she had all her wits about her, nor were her fingers all thumbs where she had wounds or broken bones to deal with.

"Quick, Stella, whip off that scarf of yours, and my neck-tie. It's a great, deep gash down his arm—almost to the bone. It's bleeding frightfully ; but we'll get that stopped. I know how to make a rough tourniquet. Just you do what I tell you, and we'll stop the worst of it."

Sally's hands were moving as fast as her tongue. She had her knife in her hands, and was ripping up the coat-sleeve with reckless disregard for seams. Stella, white and trembling, but nerved by the emergency into prompt action, did everything Sally ordered her, got a thick, stout bit of stick, and watched Sally twist it into the ligature, and draw it tighter and tighter. They saw the flow of blood slacken and almost cease, and Sally looked up and issued her orders in the same prompt, imperious fashion.

"Run to Convent House—it's much the nearest ; go to the stables straight. Tell them there to get out old Mr. Lynne's wheel-chair, and run it along here as fast as they can. Don't

say a word to Miss Lynne yet. We'll do all that later. He's got to be taken to the nearest house as fast as he can be got. Off with you! I'll stay by him till you come back. Don't lose a moment!"

Stella was off like the wind. In less time than Sally had reckoned possible, men were beside her, with the invalid chair, which ran lightly and easily upon its wheels. Sir Humphrey was lifted and placed within it, still unconscious from loss of blood.

"Never mind that," spoke Sally. "It's just as well he should stay in that faint. If he came to, the bleeding might start again. We'll get a doctor to him now as fast as we can. Take him up to Convent House, men. I'll go and tell Miss Lynne. It'll be all right, you'll see. He ought not to be moved more than can be helped till the wound is dressed. And it's twice as far even to Nun's Bower."

Sally dashed off in advance of the convoy, and burst in upon Esther just as the dusk was really deepening, and she was beginning to wonder why Diana did not come in. However, as the girl was uncertain in her movements when out shooting, she was in no wise concerned, and looked up with a smiling face as the sound of flying footsteps along the passage made itself heard.

But it was no Di who rushed in upon her, breathless and excited, and Esther started back with a gasp of dismay, for Sally's hands were crimson from her recent surgical manipulations, and there were stains upon her dress also, though evidently the girl herself had received no injury.

"My dear, what has happened?" spoke Esther anxiously. "Has there been some accident?"

"Yes; we are bringing him here. It isn't very bad—a flesh wound, you know, but deep, and it bled dreadfully. We got the wheel-chair from the stables. We knew you would lend it. It was just outside your ring fence, by the little gate. I told them to bring him here, and to go for the doctor sharp.

It is Sir Humphrey ; he has been wounded in the arm rather badly."

Instantly Esther became quite composed and alert. With her hand on Sally's arm, she moved towards the hall, ringing the bell as she passed it. The hall of Convent House was in effect one of its pleasantest rooms. A great glowing fire always blazed there, and it was lighted up before the rest of the house, so that already the lamps gave a clear glow. Esther, with Sally's assistance, drew a little forward a great couch, placing it sideways to the fire, and the housekeeper, at her instructions, brought quickly all such medicaments and restoratives as were likely to be wanted.

Sally watched and helped so long as there was anything to do, and when the sounds of the approach announced that the patient had arrived, she dashed away into the darkness, and scudded up the wide yew walk to Nun's Bower upon an errand of her own.

She did not know whom she might find there. Archie would most likely be out shooting, but Colonel York would probably be back. He did sometimes take out his gun, but he was not able to stand long tramps or long hours. When the door was opened for her, however, there was Archie, just pulling off his muddy gaiters in the hall, whilst York stood in the open doorway of one of the rooms, exchanging greetings with him. Both men looked in amaze at Sally as she appeared ; for though she had washed her hands, and done something towards modifying her dishevelment, she was still something of a wild figure, and her face showed that she came as a bringer of tidings.

"Sir Humphrey has been attacked in the woods," she said, in her abrupt way. "We found him lying there bleeding. I saw the creature who had done it—just for a moment. It is that gliding thing who plays ghost round here, with the white about its head."

"Ah!" cried York, starting forward, "that Hindoo juggler chap again!"

"Is it that?" cried Sally. "I declare I believe you are right! I never thought of that; but it would all fit. A creepy-crawly thing that glides and squirms, and seems to wriggle and vanish away. Oh, that would explain why I couldn't lay hands on him—"

"You don't mean that you tried?—you—a girl—and unarmed!" cried Archie, who was buttoning up his gaiters again as fast as he could.

"Why not? I had a stick. Besides, I didn't know who or what it was. I didn't know then what had happened, only that there had been some scuffle somewhere. Then we found Sir Humphrey, Stella and I. We've had him taken to Miss Lynne at Convent House." Sally faced the two men squarely as she added: "I've come to tell you. But I want him to stop there for a few days. It would be much the best for him and for everything."

"But, Miss Lynne," cried Archie, standing up and pulling on his overcoat, "it will be too much for her."

"It won't be too much for her," answered Sally stoutly; "it's as much for her as for him I want it. Don't take him away. Let him stay for a little while. What good are men with anybody who's been hurt and is a bit weak and ill? You leave him to Miss Lynne!"

They looked at her; they looked at each other, and then Archie said:

"Come along, Miss Sally. We'll go and have a look how things are going, and what the doctor says about it all. You don't think he'll be too bad to move, do you?"

"I don't think so; not unless there's something beside the deep cut right up his arm. But I just want it to be settled so, and I came to get you on my side."

They were plunging along together now down the dark avenue. Sally had eyes like a cat in the dark, and when

Archie stumbled she cried, "Hold up!" and put her hand on his arm to steady him.

"Look here," he said, "I want to do what you wish, of course; but how about Miss Lynne? She's not been well, and Miss Conquest says she has been overdone with so many things, and that she should be kept quiet and all that; and now—"

"Don't you believe a word of what Di says!" suddenly flashed out Sally. "I mean, don't you let anything she has said make a difference now. Miss Lynne is just the best nurse in all the place, and loves to care for sick people. Sir Humphrey is her oldest friend. They have known each other all their lives. What on earth can be more natural than that she should take care of him just for a day or two, when he is brought to her house? Di doesn't understand—at least, I hope she doesn't. Don't ask me any more. I don't want to talk about it. But if you let anything she says to you, or has said, stand in the way of what I want, I'll never forgive you!"

Archie was silent. In the darkness he could not see Sally's face, but he heard by her voice that she was moved and disturbed—that some emotions were working within her, of which she did not choose to speak more explicitly. Nevertheless, Archie was not a stupid or a dense youth, so his mind rapidly surveyed the situation and the events of the past months, and a curious illuminating flash seemed to break in upon him.

"Holy Moses!" he exclaimed, beneath his breath, "can it be possible she has been working for that, and that Sally, of all the people in the world, has been the one to see through her?"

"Did you speak?" asked Sally, as they emerged out of the blackness of the yew avenue.

A little gleam of moonlight now relieved the gloom, and had Sally been wont to study faces much, she might have been struck by the expression upon her companion's.

"I didn't exactly speak," he said, in a curious voice; "but one of these days—if you will let me, Sally—I declare I believe I will speak."

"Oh, all right," she answered, not in the least estimating the curious tumult of emotion she had suddenly awakened within him, "only just you remember and be on my side now. If you fail me here, I shall be awfully angry with you."

"I don't intend to fail you, Sally," he said, in the same curious tone of voice, "either now or in the future."

It was not very unusual for him to call her Sally, and she habitually called him Archie, as Di had done from the first. She dashed on now towards the house, he following her step for step, and in another few minutes they had gained the house, and had entered by the partly opened door.

Standing in the smaller outer hall, they could see the group in the larger one. The doctor was bending over the prostrate man (he had been luckily caught almost at the gates, and was on the spot as soon as the patient) and was evidently dressing the wound, whilst Esther stood beside him, handing what was needed, her face grave, but quiet and tranquil, her whole mind absorbed in the task; no quiverings of nervous trepidation visible about her, no shrinking, and no repulsion; nerved by the great wish to do all that was possible, which she was plainly doing without effort.

Sir Humphrey had recovered consciousness. From time to time his eyes opened, and each time they did so they fixed themselves instinctively upon Esther's face. Once and again she held a glass to his lips, and there came a ghost of a smile upon his pale lips as he made a gesture of thanks. Archie watched for a few moments, and felt the pressure of Sally's hand upon his arm, as much as to say, "I told you so!" Then he stepped forward, the doctor having evidently almost completed his task, and presented himself in the group about the prostrate man.

"Well, here's a pretty kettle of fish!" he remarked.

"Didn't know you were not to be trusted to get home alone all safe and sound. What in the world has happened to you?"

"Never mind now," spoke the doctor quickly; "there's a time for talking, and a time for keeping quiet; and just now it's the turn for keeping quiet. You ought to be put to bed at once, Sir Humphrey, and to stop there for forty-eight hours without getting up."

"There is a room ready now for you, Humphrey," spoke Esther, with her tranquil smile. "I did not think Dr. Ballard would sanction your exposure to the night air again, or your being moved so soon with those stitches in your arm."

"Quite right, Miss Lynne, quite right," spoke the doctor; "if it had to be done—why, we'd do what we could; but it's far the best thing for him to stay here, if you'll take him."

"But, Esther, I really could not so impose upon you," spoke Sir Humphrey, in a voice which seemed curiously thin and toneless, and bespoke his physical feebleness more than even the deadly whiteness of his face.

Her answer was a smile, whilst Archie instantly said:

"Oh, that's all nonsense, boss, if Miss Lynne has made her arrangements. What good are a pair of bachelors like York and me, when there's a sick man in the case? We'd black your boots, or do any mortal thing for you we could; but men are such clumsy brutes—even with the best will in the world. And we all know what Miss Lynne is like. And if she can manage it without taxing her strength, why then—"

"Ah, but I am afraid it will tax her strength. Esther, you have been ill and overdone as it is—"

Sir Humphrey could not speak too many words at a time. Loss of blood had told upon him. Esther laid her hand softly upon his lips, and answered:

"It is all arranged, Humphrey. I am not ill or weak. I am in my element where there is illness. Give me this pleasure, for the old sake's sake. We have been brother and

sister so long; surely you do not grudge me the sister's place?"

His gaze sought hers with a curious intensity. At that moment he was aware of another pair of ardent eyes fastened upon him. He slightly turned his head, and there was Diana, pale and strained, gazing upon him with parted lips and wild eyes.

"You must forgive me, my dear, for this intrusion," he said. "It was involuntary on my part. I never would have disobeyed orders had I known what they were doing to me."

Diana spoke no word; she turned and fled upstairs like a hunted thing. Esther gazed for a moment at her in amaze, and then at Sir Humphrey, as though to ask an explanation. But he offered none. His eyes had closed again. He was carried upstairs, and Archie went with him, pondering many things in his mind, chiefly conscious of Sally's curious expression as he saw it last, and the little ejaculation which had passed her lips as Di and Sir Humphrey exchanged looks and words.

So the girl had her way. Sir Humphrey Vanborough for five days was the guest of Esther Lynne at Convent House, whilst great hue and cry was made for the perpetrator of the cowardly assault, of which the invalid was able soon to give some account.

He was decidedly of York's opinion now, that his assailant had been an Oriental—though whether the Hindoo conjuror or not he could not surmise. He never saw him clearly. The man must have been hidden in a tree, and have fallen upon him like a snake from some upper branch as he passed along. His quick ear caught the sound of the rustle in the boughs, and he saw the gleam of the murderous knife which was so aimed as to strike downwards to his very heart. He had caught the blow on his arm, which had been gashed to the very bone, and he thought he had received a blow on the head also, as unconsciousness had supervened instantly, and there was a

swelling which might have been caused either by a blow or a fall.

He began to entertain York's idea that he was pursued by the avenger of blood—the result of one of those endless feuds of the East, carried on so relentlessly, so silently, so mysteriously. It was not a pleasant thought, for the assailant had got away and was still at large. Whether he thought his work sufficiently done, or whether he heard the sound of approaching steps, and feared to make sure of his victim then, could only be a matter of surmise. What was plain was that he would sooner or later learn that his victim had escaped; and there was little doubt but that he would repeat the attack at some other occasion.

This, however, the men kept to themselves. They spoke, indeed, very little of their guesses on the subject, save to each other, and to the private detective whom Sir Humphrey was prevailed upon to summon from Scotland Yard. Not that he had much faith in the methods of the West as opposed to the cunning craftiness of a son of the East; but it seemed right to take every reasonable precaution, and he took it accordingly.

Yet, in spite of all anxiety and suffering, he was strangely content in those days. When he came down upon the third day, it was to sit beside Esther's fire, to talk with her, to watch her at her little tasks, and be waited upon by her, as though it were his right. It seemed so natural to them both, that he scarcely protested, and she showed that she did it without a thought. Diana scarcely appeared. She had a curious dislike and shrinking from weakness or suffering in any form. She shivered when she saw Sir Humphrey's slung arm; but over and above that there was another reason why she avoided his society just now. She wondered sometimes what he might say—what he might think. A curious hatred of herself alternated with fits of almost hatred of him. And yet he exercised a curious fascination over her still—at moments. Her life was dominated by thoughts of him in

a persistent and inexplicable manner. She grew irritable and angry at last.

"I can't stand this much longer!" she cried fiercely to herself the day that Sir Humphrey had gone back to Nun's Bower, the old easy intimacy between him and Esther completely re-established. "If I am to stay here much longer—and somehow I don't want to go—I must find something fresh to amuse myself with. I've played with edged tools once too often. I've cut my own fingers at last; and suppose he should find it out?"

CHAPTER XXIV

COMING CHRISTMAS

It was Sir Humphrey's idea ; but Diana took it up with her characteristic energy, and flung herself into the scheme with that eagerness and enthusiasm which was one of her characteristics.

"It is so long since I spent a Christmas in England," Sir Humphrey had said, "I should like a real old-fashioned Christmas—a day for the children. We old folks have memories which are prone to make us somewhat sad, but the children have all their life before them. It is their day *par excellence*—let us have a real children's feast."

Cleethorpe did not lack for its contingent of little folks. There were the three at the Rectory, and now three more at the curate's home. These latter had some little cousins, whose parents were in India, coming to spend the Christmas holidays with them. Other houses in the locality had young people coming home from school, as well as the nursery party at home, and there could not be too many for Sir Humphrey, whose motto seemed to be, "The more the merrier."

It was Diana who voted for some tableaux from favourite fairy tales, and it was Archie who declared that if they once roofed in the central court of Nun's Bower, they could contrive the most picturesque and charming stage effects for the little actors, and arrange the most delightful groups. Sir Humphrey caught at the idea. He declared that Nun's Bower had never had a proper house-warming yet, and that it should have it now at the approaching festival. To cover in

the little courtyard would be a matter quite easily arranged, and would only involve the temporary darkening for a few days of the upper and lower corridors, which must be lighted artificially during that time. He had set his heart upon giving the entertainment himself, and his house was quite large enough for eating and drinking purposes, and for a certain amount of romping and playing ; for the double corridors, with the little connecting stairways at the corners, and the rooms all opening from each other, gave scope—as he remembered well—for a great variety of delightful games.

But he had not seen his way at first to the theatrical arrangements, or exactly how and where to place the giant Christmas-tree which he had set his heart upon ; but this idea of Archie's made all smooth sailing, and the three bachelors threw themselves heart and soul into the work of arranging and transforming the house, whilst York designed the roofing of the courtyard, gave instructions to the village carpenter, and made himself clerk of the works generally, as Diana did that of mistress of the ceremonies concerning the arrangement of the little children's play and the setting of the tableaux.

As for Esther, she was Sir Humphrey's right hand in all other matters. She was able to give him all the help he needed as to the question of supply. They spent one long day together in London at toy-shops and confectioners ; and no one thought of interfering or saying that Miss Lynne was being done to death.

She looked much better than she had done earlier in the season. Perhaps it was the touch of frost in the air which brought the little pink flush to her cheeks. She looked younger again ; her step was light and free ; she was full of plans and projects of her own, as ever at the Christmas season. But she had always time and thought to spare for any demands made upon her by her neighbours, and of these, first and foremost stood Sir Humphrey Vanborough.

The old easy friendship had been completely re-established

now. He came and went as he had done at the first. Often he would sit for the greater part of the afternoon with her beside her fire. They talked of the past and of the present—seldom of the future. Sometimes they sat in the silence of true intimacy, content and at rest. Esther asked no more. She knew not what was coming. She sometimes watched her old friend closely when Diana was near—and wondered. But of late the girl seldom remained long with them. She seemed full of work, and endued with the secret of perpetual motion. With the Christmas holidays had come the frost, and skating was added to other occupations. Here, indeed, Di was in her element; for though her childhood had been spent in warm latitudes, she had passed several Canadian winters, and her grace and skill and dexterity upon the ice was a thing beautiful to watch. She threw Archie's achievements—which were not small—altogether into the shade, and the only person who ever seemed in any way to rival her was—oddly enough—the crippled soldier, York.

To his own surprise, the soldier found himself on skates less helpless than on his feet walking. He, too, had had his Canadian winters in far-off years, and he showed at once what an expert he had been when in full strength and health. Even now upon the ice a grace of ease of movement returned to him which was most exhilarating. Diana, who had by fits and starts taken an interest in this man, and had felt his latent power, suddenly found him more companionable than she had dreamed he could be. It was curious, she thought, but some of her power seemed latterly to have escaped her. Sir Humphrey was her friend, but nothing more. Now that Sally had so rudely opened her eyes, she saw this plainly; and with a curious sense of mingled shame and self-scorn, had withdrawn herself from any further efforts at establishing any supremacy over him. Archie, too, in some curious fashion seemed to have changed. They were still the most excellent friends and comrades, but she was instinctively

aware that her power over him was gone. He admired, but he no longer adored her. She was his very good friend, but she was not his bright particular star. He would do her bidding as a matter of course, and with alacrity; but he did not show by his every act and word that he regarded her service as the chiefest delight and glory of his life. He did not, as it were, lay himself down for her to walk over. Perhaps she regarded him with more respect on this account; but it set her wondering.

York had never been her slave; that she knew very well. From the first she had always been aware that he criticised her—that he appraised her at more of her true worth than some others were able to do, that her beauty did not dazzle him, nor her powers of fascination charm—beyond a certain point. Nor had she cared about this, save in moments of occasional pique. She had regarded York at the outset as rather beyond the pale. His infirmity and broken health slightly disgusted her—to use a strong word. There was in her heart a curious sense of revolt against whatever was not shapely and attractive and flawless. The sight of suffering was repugnant to her, and no one could look at York in old days without knowing him to be a very suffering man, if not in the immediate present, yet in the recent past, the traces of which remained branded upon him.

He would carry something of that look all his life; but it had greatly modified with time and returning strength. She watched him upon the ice; she took pleasure in circling about with him, and cutting those elaborate double figures which none but they two could attempt. She decided that he was a distinguished-looking man, with the remains of what must have been great physical attraction. The attraction, indeed, remained still, she decided; and when she saw him amongst eager boys and laughing girls, crowding round him for instruction and “wrinkles” as to how this or that was to be done, and heard his clear, terse directions, and noted how

commanding were his ways and words, and how naturally all looked to him to umpire their contests and arrange their handicaps, she recognised in him that quality of a leader of men which attracted her singularly; and she realised as she had never done before what it must have been to such a man to be laid aside from active service, to have his career cut short in its prime, and to know that he could never fill that place for which he seemed to be destined by training and temperament.

Diana was seeing in these days many things which had escaped her before. She was noting something about Sally which perplexed her somewhat. Since that night when Sally had spoken her mind with such frankness, the two girls had not met very often in private, though they were constantly together in company. No apparent diminution in their friendship had taken place; and Di was generous enough, with all her faults, to admire Sally for her courage and her candour; but it had left its mark all the same. Sally was doubtful whether Di had forgiven her. Di felt that Sally had seen through her rather more than was agreeable. They avoided, by mutual consent, being alone together, and Di wondered whether, when Rudolf should return for Christmas, as was expected, Sally would say anything to him in her bluff way as to what had happened. She wondered also whether she would find Rudolf as attractive as she had done in the summer. For really, if she did, it might be worth while to think of settling something with regard to the future. She saw very plainly that she would never be Lady Vanborough—though whether Esther ever would (thanks to her interposition) she could not hazard an opinion. Perhaps she might do worse than take Rudolf, and push him to the forefront, using her own wealth, beauty, force of character, and ambition, to be seconded by his own. She might live to be Lady Hastings before so many years had passed. And she felt as though she would like to retain her friends

and interests in Cleethorpe ; and, after all, Bishop's Hall and Convent House would make a very respectable estate when joined together (as in the course of nature they would be) by a union between the Squire's son and the niece of Esther Lynne.

Diana had an unwelcome and a most unwonted feeling of having made something of a mess of her affairs all round, and she wondered whether the neighbourhood were in any way conscious of it. If so, she must show them pretty plainly that they were mistaken, and perhaps a speedy engagement with Rudolf Hastings would be the best way out of the present rather uncomfortable situation. If any unpleasant remarks had been made, this would silence them. She would become again the central figure of local interest, and would queen it royally and graciously over all the place in right of her future position. So she skimmed about upon her skates—a graceful, notable figure, in crimson velvet and soft grey fur—the observed of all observers ; laughing heartily when she caught sight of Sally, leading her hockey team with unrivalled energy—perfectly at home on her skates, wonderfully rapid in her movements, and in her powers of stooping, twisting, and turning ; yet nevertheless preserving through it all the characteristic ungainliness of action which seemed inseparable from all she did, and which always evoked from Di laughing comments of amusement.

“Isn't she like an elephant on skates—poor old Sally ?” she asked laughingly of Archie, as she skimmed along at his side.

“She plays the best game of ice-hockey that ever I've seen,” he answered, and turned his head to watch her as she struck at the ball, and followed its course, guiding it with rare skill, for all her ungainly action, and keeping it well away from all adversaries.

“Oh, yes ; she's awfully good at games—it's her *metier*, you know,” and Di gave him a curious glance sidelong as she swept onwards, and very softly whistled under her breath.

It was dusk before Sally's game was finished, and then she was delayed by various small good-natured offices performed for other skaters. Children had to be helped out of their skates, and there was a boy with a cut hand to be bound up and sent on his way. By the time that Sally was free to make her own way home it was almost dark, and the company of skaters had pretty well dispersed. She was used to be amongst the last to leave, and the walk across the home fields was short and familiar. But she had only just reached the style which led thither before a familiar figure emerged from the shelter of the hedge. Archie flung away the end of his cigar, and offered her a hand as she flung herself over, and then possessed himself of her skates.

"Oh, you needn't do that!" she cried, laughing; "I'm not one of that sort of girls!"

"What sort of girls?" he asked, delighted always when he could draw her out.

"Oh, you know, the sort that expects to be waited on, and have things done for them, as though they hadn't got arms and legs of their own. I hate not having something to carry; I don't know what to do with my hands. If you think you're bound to carry my skates, I'll have yours!"

And before he knew what she was about, she had possessed herself of them and was examining them critically, they being the newest patent out—like everything that Archie possessed.

"Don't think I care about them. I swear by my old acmes—I don't cotton to all the new-fangled dodges. When I've got an old friend, I stick to it. I suppose I take a bit after my governor, after all. Now, you hanker after every latest, newest thing you see or hear of, whether it's clothes, or whether it's guns, or whatever it may be. You ought to marry the daughter of some big universal provider, like Whiteley, or one of that fry, so that your papa-in-law could provide you with every latest fad and fashion just as soon as ever it came out."

A curious light leaped suddenly into Archie's eyes:

"I don't want to marry the daughter of a U. P., Sally; I want to marry—you."

She looked at him for one single moment from under her brows, and then her eyes went back to the skates in her hands.

"That's a good 'un!" she remarked.

Archie almost laughed aloud, despite the fact that he was desperately in earnest—more in earnest than he had ever been over anything in his life before. He thought his own way of proposing and her way of taking it were alike original, and that the situation, if a little critical, was exceedingly delightful. Never had this odd girl attracted him more. He did not care one whit for her eccentricities of mind or of person. There was something beneath all that which had got a firm grip of him, and he, the dandy and man of fashion, whose ambition had always been to have everything of the most perfect and sumptuous about him, was ardently in love with a girl distinctly plain, distinctly awkward, and whose tastes and aspirations were as different from his as light from darkness. And yet he loved her! Would she ever believe it? Would she ever return his love?

"It's the best I have to offer," he said. "Won't you take it, Sally?"

Something in his voice arrested her attention this time, and held it. She looked at him straight, and saw that in his eyes which brought a slow flush to her cheek.

"I thought you were chaffing again," she answered slowly.

"I have never been chaffing at any time, Sally. I have been trying to tell you this ever so long, but you always put me off."

"I thought you were chaffing," she said again. "Men don't say those sort of things to me—I'm not that style."

"You're the style I want my wife to be, Sally!" cried Archie, with sudden heat. "I don't want my wife to be a woman that every man has made love to for Heaven knows

how many years!—who has flirted with them all in turn, brought them on, and thrown them aside—who likes to turn you inside out for her amusement, and then pitches you away like a squeezed orange. That's not my ideal for a wife, after having had a good look round. Sally, will you marry me?"

She continued to gaze at him with round, wide eyes.

"I say, don't you think you're just a bit rough on Di?"

It was like her, he thought, that she should at such a moment as this take up the cudgels for her friend.

"I'm not thinking only of Miss Conquest; I've been in London, in India—I've seen that type everywhere. But I've never seen another Sally. I want my wife to be unique."

"A sort of freak," quoth Sally, a curious twinkle in her eye, though there was a quiver about her lips that was not discouraging, "so that you can make a show of her, if all other means of livelihood fail."

"I want a woman I can trust—a woman who is *pukkah* all through, if you know what that means. I expect you know your Bible long chalks better than I do, Sally; perhaps you know where the verse can be found—I know it is there somewhere—the verse that comes into my head sometimes when I am watching you or thinking about you: 'Her husband's heart can safely trust in her.' That's the kind of feeling I want to have about my wife."

Sally was silent. The thing had come upon her after all with a sense of surprise, though she had not been able to avoid the consciousness that Archie Vanborough had for some while been wanting to get to close quarters with her. At first she had been too utterly taken aback to consider it seriously for a moment. Then a curious sense of wonder, and almost of indignation, possessed her, as though she saw in the prospect some sort of infringement of her liberties, the imposition of new fetters and shackles. Then a different and inexplicable feeling stole over her of which she was half afraid—the sense of new meanings to life, of some factor with which she might

have to reckon, of which she had never taken real cognisance before. She had put the matter from her, had ridiculed herself for letting such notions possess her ; but all the same, she had not quite succeeded in banishing thought, or those dreams which are the prerogative of girlhood and youth. And now Archie had spoken words which could not be set aside or misunderstood. She had suddenly reached the rubicon of life. The next few minutes must decide it all. And yet, what a big decision it would be !

“Why do you say such things to me?” she asked, almost fiercely.

“Because I love you, Sally,” he answered squarely, “and I want you to let me teach you to love me in return.”

“You don’t expect me to love you—yet?”

“I wish I did,” he answered ; “but I’m not such a vain ass.”

“Oh, but I do like you, Archie—I like you awfully!” she cried ; “I won’t have you call yourself names. You have been hugely good to me. We chummed up from the first. I like you tremendously ; but the other is such a big thing.”

“I know it is, Sally—an awful big thing. It gets hold of you, and there’s no getting away from it. I did try to get away—yes, I truly did ; for I didn’t think you were going to be an easy girl to win. I don’t think you are now ! But I’ve got to try and get you. It’s come to that with me. But I won’t ask much to begin with—only that you’ll let me love you, and try to teach you how to love me—”

“And not talk about getting married just straight down on the nail, as though you wanted it next week?”

“I’ll be as patient as I can, Sally ; but that’s what I want. I want to marry you. I want us to have a little home of our own—not too big, but big enough to keep our horses and dogs and have friends down to enjoy the garden and the tennis and the golf and things. We’d leave ourselves a margin, so that

we could go abroad when we wanted and see the world. There are heaps and heaps of places I long to see, and a lot more I want to show you. When I find myself thinking about them, it always comes into my head to say, 'I wish I could show that to Sally! How she would laugh!' We could climb some snow mountains together—that's awful fun; and we could go yachting in the Norwegian Fiords—I've done that too. Sally, I'd give you a real all-round good time of it if you'd only let me. Would it be so very hard to marry me?"

"I'll not marry you for the things you can give me!" cried Sally quickly; "I'll only marry you if I can care for you yourself enough. But that's the trouble! How can I know whether it is enough? I like you—I think you're awfully nice. I can't think why you want such a gowk as me; it makes me feel almost ashamed. But I don't feel as though I knew what being in love was like. Archie, do you know yourself?"

"O Lor', yes!" groaned Archie, "I know all about it—worse luck, I was going to say; for if you won't have me, Sally, it will be awful hard luck. I'll have to go away, and not come back any more. I'll go to South Africa or something and get a Boer bullet into me perhaps—"

"You shan't!" cried Sally fiercely; "I won't have it!"

Light leaped into Archie's eyes. Somehow or other, next minute he had Sally by both her hands, and the skates had fallen with a clash to the ground.

"You don't want me to go away—and be shot?"

"I won't have it, I say!"

"Then you'll have me, Sally—you'll have to take one or the other; for if I don't stay—for you—I'll go off instant!"

There was a deep, breathless pause, broken only by the slight, panting sound from their parted lips.

"Then I guess you'll have to stay, Archie," said Sally slowly; and the next minute he had kissed her unawares.

She broke from him then, and ran like a hunted hare across

the fields. He picked up both pairs of skates, and leisurely followed, his eyes dancing.

"I'll go and have it out with the Squire forthwith," he said. "Nothing like striking whilst the iron is hot. Well, one thing I can be very sure of: no man except her father or brother has ever kissed my Sally before—that's one comfort."

CHAPTER XXV

THE CHILDREN'S FÊTE

It was the prettiest sight ! Never had such a tree as that been seen in all the countryside ! It really was a tree ; it was planted for the time being in the central fountain of the little courtyard, now converted into something more like fairy-land than the children could have imagined, and towering up right to the top of the roofed-in enclosure, which was as high as the house itself. The tree was a perfect blaze of candles, glass balls, sparkling ornaments, and gay flags, whilst toys and gifts of every description loaded the branches, and were also piled in fascinating heaps around the fountain itself ; for some of the gifts were too heavy and bulky for even the strongest of the boughs to bear.

All the children of the place were congregated in the surrounding corridors, gazing with sparkling and fascinated eyes at the wonderful tree. One of the sides of the corridor had been reserved for the farm children, and another for the school children, so that all the little people of the place might share in the treat. The little folks who were of Sir Humphrey's indoor party, in their dainty muslins and party suits, occupied the other two sides of the quadrangle, distinction being chiefly made in order to facilitate the rapid distribution of so many gifts.

Later on all the children were to join in singing a few Christmas carols, after which the village contingent would retire with bags of buns and nuts and oranges, whilst the remainder would enjoy the sumptuous tea provided for them,

and romp about the delightful house, whilst all traces of the tree would be removed, and the stage effects for the little play and the tableaux quickly arranged.

Sir Humphrey, disguised as a veritable Father Christmas, stood beside the tree, a magic wand in his hand, with which he dexterously unhooked the hanging fruit, and passed it to one or another of his many fairy assistants. They looked like fairies to the dazzled children, those pretty ladies in their white dresses, especially the tall one with the shining coronet on her brow; for Di, true to her instincts, had dressed for the part, and looked the very impersonation of the fairy godmother, and her strong capable hands were never idle. The heaps of gifts at the foot of the tree were rapidly sorted out, and distributed during the more tedious and fascinating operation of stripping the tree. Archie was in the upper corridor, with a long, hooked stick, denuding the higher branches, and Father Christmas had a never-failing flow of merry remarks and apt illustrations wherewith to amuse his eager little guests. All the sashes of the windows giving upon the court had been removed, so that the double arcade was open to the roofed-in enclosure, and nothing impeded the view of the spectators.

Esther Lynne was busy enough, providing big bags and wrappers in which the delighted children stowed away their treasures, writing labels for the bags, and piling them safely away in the place set apart for the purpose. It was pretty to see them crowding round her, eager to display their gifts, confident of her sympathy and interest, and of the ability of her clever fingers to pack up even the most fragile acquisitions so that they would come to no harm.

Esther looked up from her task, deeply hemmed in by the eager little crowd, all clamouring for her attention, to find Sir Humphrey's eyes fixed smilingly upon her. He had finished his task by this time, and had doffed the wrappings and flowing beard of Father Christmas, in which he had not been recognised by many of the small fry. When they were aware

of his presence they set up a shout of, "Sir Tiger! Sir Tiger"—and transferred to him some of their multitude of questions and exclamations, as sure of his sympathy and interest as of Miss Lynne's.

In the courtyard Stella and Di were marshalling the contingent of carol singers, and soon the strain of children's voices rose strong and sweet, led by the firmer, rounder notes of their adult instructors. The children rushed off to see, to hear, and join, so that for the moment Esther and Sir Humphrey were alone together in the toy-strewn room. She was carefully gathering together the different belongings, and as carefully sorting and labelling them; he was watching her at her task with a curiously bright and intense light in his eyes. Both listened to the sound of the children's voices, and when their eyes met, they smiled.

He came and placed himself by her, helping her with the last of her parcels. Then they stood side by side together in the doorway, from which a glimpse into the illuminated court could be obtained.

"It is like a combination of East and West," spoke Sir Humphrey, with a smile; "though not much of the East about it, save the draperies and the harmony of colour. How often I have wondered what my first English Christmas would be like! Do you know, I always pictured it spent somewhere near you, Esther? I think Christmas would not be Christmas to me under other circumstances."

She lifted her eyes to his face. There was a very sweet shining there. He looked deep down into them, and his heart leaped. But for the memory of certain words of warning heard not long ago, he might then and there have spoken out that which was in his heart. But it came to him that perhaps the warning had been right. Friendship true and deep might content a woman's heart, if not a man's. He must not act selfishly towards one whose whole life had been one long act of sweet unselfishness. At that moment he wanted her for his

very own, as perhaps he had never done before ; but again he reminded himself how little he had to offer—just the fag-end of a life which might be cut short tragically at any moment, and he held his peace.

He was not a man to let himself be daunted or dominated by personal fears ; but he had become gradually convinced that there was some plot on foot against his life, and this, one of those mysterious, deadly, Oriental plots, inexplicable almost to the Western mind, a plot which weaves itself with peculiar subtlety and caution, and may take years in the accomplishment, if the agent cannot be taken red-handed, and so consigned to prison and impotence. Even then it might be possible that others would be found to take up the task. Sir Humphrey had not passed the greater part of his adult life in the East for nothing. He knew the peculiar, stealthy patience of the Oriental in all its mysterious ramifications. He knew how one of his last acts in the country before he left had been intimately connected with the unravelling of some widespread conspiracy which had cost many lives, and which had led to the execution of certain notable criminals, who, but for his astuteness, might probably never have been tracked down. He could understand that he might be the mark for some racial hatred and vengeance. He was certain that his life had been attempted, and might probably be again. Was this, then, the moment to ask of the woman he loved the gift of herself? He thought not, and, indeed, the psychical moment had already passed ; for the carol-singing came suddenly to an end, and his duties as host once more engulfed him.

The business of tea was an engrossing one for all. Sir Humphrey had prepared all manner of charming surprises for the little people. There were cakes which, when cut, were crammed full of crackers or of sweetmeats. There were buns which squeaked when they were cut or bitten, and others which contained folded paper caps or pinafores, or funny animals' heads. Laughter and fun prevailed everywhere down

the long tables, and constantly the children were heard to exclaim : " Aren't we having a nice party ! "

But the entertainment, instead of ending with tea, seemed only just to have begun. It was seven o'clock before they had finished the meal, and there was to be an hour given over to romps and games of hide-and-seek, whilst the little actors were getting ready for their parts, and the stage effects were being prepared in the courtyard. Fascinating glimpses of these latter could be obtained through the corridor windows, although curtains had been by this time let down, so as to block out anything like a perfect view till the right moment should arise.

York was stage manager. Diana was mistress of the ceremonies in the dressing-room. Sally and Archie arranged the fall or rise of the curtain, the lime-lights or red fires, and acted in various useful capacities behind the scenes.

Sally's sudden engagement to Archie Vanborough had taken the place completely by surprise, and nowhere was the surprise so great as within the walls of her own home. Lady Caroline had never dared to hope that Sally would make a decent marriage ; all she ever ventured to hope was that she would remain single, and not make some horrid *mésalliance* with any person beneath her in social standing. She had never understood this daughter of hers, had never in the least gauged her character. Her amazement only equalled her delight when told of Archie's proposal.

The young man had been received with open arms, and now Sally was enjoying a consideration and indulgence which was quite bewildering to her. To-night she was wearing a really very pretty new dress, white and shiny, as though it had been frosted. Her mother's maid had done her hair, and instead of its being dragged off her brow and tightly coiled into one hard knot behind, it had been so arranged as to soften and frame her face, and she had even submitted to the tiniest of tiny fringes curled over her brow, whilst the

plain gold collar, richly chased, which she wore round her throat (the gift of Sir Humphrey, who had welcomed her warmly as a prospective kinswoman), gave her a certain quaint dignity and originality of aspect.

Archie had gazed at her in amazement when they met. True, he had before observed that when Sally could be coaxed into evening dress some of the ungainliness of her aspect was modified ; but he had never seen her look as she did to-night. Pretty she never would be, and if grace ever came to her, it would be by slow development ; but, at least, there was some softening and change plainly visible about her—a change which, without robbing her one whit of her originality and individuality, had toned down in measure some of her more accentuated peculiarities ; and with children Sally was always at her best. They delighted in her funny sayings. They were not in the least afraid of her. They laughed with her and at her, and she understood them and their ways thoroughly.

She never professed to care specially about them. She called them “tiresome little beggars,” “cussed little creatures,” and had never been known to gush over them, or to talk with the faintest approach to sentiment ; but all the same, she liked to be with them, and they with her, and she was always in request at any juvenile function, however many grimaces she professed to pull at the prospect.

Archie regarded her with visible delight and pride. Di watched her and watched him—she had time for this as the children's play proceeded, for York acted as prompter, and she stood with the others in the wings, and surveyed the result of her toil—and other things as well.

“He is thoroughly in love,” she said to herself, “and I can't for the life of me tell why. I like Sally tremendously—but to marry her !—to have her always before one's eyes—oh, my ! I should want to cut her throat half-a-dozen times a day if I were her husband ! Certainly there is no accounting for taste.”

Diana would not admit, even to herself, that she was jealous. To be jealous of Sally!—the thing was absurd! And yet, why had Sally won away one of her chiefest admirers and slaves—and that without an effort (for she knew Sally had tried no artifices—that she hadn't it in her to do so), whilst she herself was still free—still to be won? Her glance roved round the scene, and lighted upon Sir Humphrey, standing beside Esther, who had a group of the youngest children about her, and was explaining the course of the little play as it proceeded.

With a queer sharp pang at heart she realised how that strong man's heart had never wavered or faltered, though she had tried hard to win it for herself—persuading herself that it would be for the good of all. She had deceived herself in the matter for a while; but she had not deceived others. It was a galling thought, and the memory of one episode sent a thrill of unwonted shame and pain through her. Then her quick eyes roved round till they rested upon Rudolf—and she gave a little start. Rudolf had been three days at home; she had seen him several times. He had been pressed into the service to-night. They had had time to discuss certain matters together, and she thought that she saw in him the same readiness as of old to fall beneath her sway. She had almost resolved that it should be Rudolf Hastings.

In some respects he was most suited to her, in age, in position, in the matter of his future career. A seat in Parliament was already being talked of for him, at the next bye-election, where a Government candidate would be pretty sure of the seat. He was elated at the prospect. She was excited about it, too. They had discussed it with some energy already; there was much more still to say. But as her glance lighted upon him now, she was conscious of a queer and disagreeable thrill running through her. Rudolf was talking to Stella, talking with earnestness and animation, and she was listening with something of a kindred interest, her eyes alight,

her colour coming and going, her lips curving to eager smiles.

Suddenly Diana awoke to the knowledge that Stella had changed of late, had developed, had improved. Contact with masculine minds, the virile personality of her kinsman, the enlarging influence of the legitimate exercise of a great gift, and a lawful ambition with regard to it, had broken down in a great measure that wall of prim complacency and unconscious self-righteousness which had been Stella's bane in the past, which had seemed to make separation between her and others, and raised up fancied barriers that cut her off from those about her. It had come gradually. It had been the steady unconscious growth of many months.

Diana had had so many other things to occupy her that often she had not thought of Stella for weeks together. She knew, however, that her portrait of Sir Humphrey Vanborough was accounted rather a wonderful achievement for a young girl with so comparatively little training. She had heard that a really noted artist had seen the work, and had been struck by it, and had spoken warmly to Stella, urging her to study and cultivate her gift, prophesying some renown for her in the future.

Perhaps it was this recent praise and encouragement which had brightened her up and given her animation and style. Her dress was particularly becoming—designed, no doubt, by herself, and very artistic in its lines and adornment. Diana felt that Rudolf was taking all this in; perhaps he might be realising that Stella Sinclair was something more than just the Rector's daughter—that she might have some independent prestige and career of her own. This was the sort of thing which would appeal to a man of his calibre. It suddenly came into Di's head to ask whether he would think more of a wife whose beauty and whose money were all she had to offer, than of one who might be known to the world by some talent which might raise her from among the crowd of women who could do nothing but talk and pose.

A curious revulsion of feeling was sweeping over Diana Conquest. Hitherto no qualms respecting herself or her universal sway, wherever she chose to exercise it, had ever seriously beset her. She had taken adulation, flattery, admiration as the natural elements of life. She had wielded the sceptre of her beauty and her power as a matter of course, never pausing to ask by what right she regarded herself as an uncrowned queen wherever she went. Now, for the first time, perhaps, in her life, she began to ask what this sovereignty was worth? Was it a merely passing and evanescent thing, a yoke willingly worn by those about her for a while, but from which they one by one emancipated themselves as they came to know and appraise her better? Or was it due to some inherent power and attraction in herself, which deepened and strengthened with time? Diana asked the question of herself fairly to-night; and she felt that the true answer was the one least to her liking, most galling to her pride.

"They don't care for me as they did—not one of them!" she said to herself, as her eyes roved over the familiar faces. "Only perhaps Esther—and that is her sweetness, not my merit. I have treated her worse than anyone—if only she knew it. But if she did, it would make no difference. The rest—they like me; oh, yes, I can hold a sort of pleasant friendship and liking; but it cools down to that—and stays there. I can amuse them; when I like I can fascinate and dominate them; but I cannot hold them. It is froth and flummery; and bit by bit they come to know it. Why is it?"

She asked the question almost fiercely; yet all the while, deep down in her heart—that heart which now and again she had partially laid bare to Esther—the answer lay hidden. At this moment she dragged it out and held it up before her eyes in a fierce kind of scorn.

"It is because I am selfish—selfish to the core. I want all that life has to offer for myself—and myself only. I like to be

loved and courted because it ministers to my vanity ; because I want always to be first, not because I have anything to give myself, anything to be loved for except just my good looks and my ability to lead and amuse people. For a time I succeed, and then I think I am everything in the world, and I get blown out with vanity and conceit.

"It has happened again and again, but I have made tracks before anything like a real *fiasco* could come about. I have sought pastures new, and have fancied myself still omnipotent. But here I have been a fixture, and they are beginning to find me out. There's nothing in me—that's the simple truth ! I'm a floating soap bubble, pretty to look at—you can't help looking at them—but when they are pricked, pouf ! there's an end ! It's going to be like that with me here. I shall be tried in the balances and be found wanting. I shall be relegated to a back seat. Esther will keep me as long as I care to stay ; but what is life going to be like in the future, if I am just a girl—getting beyond girlhood, too—whom men propose to after a few weeks' acquaintance, but after a few months' think better of it ? That is what I ask."

Strange thoughts, perhaps, for such an evening, but yet not quite out of place either ; for Diana had felt already more than once to-night that her sovereignty was on the wane. Sally was in some sort a greater object of interest than she to the adult guests—Sally in the blush of her happiness and wonder over her recently announced engagement. Stella, even, was having her little triumph, on the strength of her artistic achievement. Diana had felt a curious sense of being left out somehow in the cold. She could not really complain of not having received plenty of attention, and she had been too busy over the tree and the children to find time to spare for other admirers, but time was when these would have come flocking about her like bees round a honey-pot. Now she was not quite this centre of attraction, despite her good looks and her wonderful gown. Was it that people began to be half

afraid of playing with fire in her society? She had the reputation of being able to say very cutting things to the admirers who presumed too much; and yet she did not desire them to cease presuming altogether.

"The fact is, whatever I may choose to call it, I have been an arrant flirt for years, and at last the name has caught on and stuck. They are afraid of me, and it serves me right!"

The girl was too clear-headed, too outspoken to others not to be outspoken with herself when her blood was up. At this moment a great wave of self-scorn was rushing over her, and she had a momentary impulse to "cut the whole concern," as she mentally called it, to bid adieu to Esther and Convent House and Cleethorpe, pack up her goods and chattels, and betake herself to Paris or the Riviera, or to some gay winter resort, where, under the pleasant chaperonage of some fashionable dame (who could easily be found willing for the task), she might enter upon a new career of triumph, and forget all the small humiliations of the past.

Yet, whilst these thoughts were floating and forming in her brain, the children's play was being enacted amid much applause, and all that Di had undertaken to do was promptly and ably accomplished. The play ended, the tableaux began, following each other in rapid succession. The eyes of the audience were concentrated upon the stage. Nobody saw how it happened. None were aware of the approaching tragedy. How it originated no eye witnessed; but the stealthy flames had crept up beneath the roofing of boards which formed the covering to the courtyard. The fire must have had considerable hold before the least sign of it appeared, for when the draperies suddenly ignited a perfect sheet of flame seemed to be waving overhead. Masses of blazing wood and flaming curtain fell upon the stage on to the heads of the terrified children. Screams of horror and terror and anguish instantly arose in dread concert, lost in the overwhelming yell of, "Fire! Fire! Fire!"

CHAPTER XXVI

"SO AS BY FIRE"

THE terror and the panic was short-lived, thanks to the coolness, promptitude and courage of the men present, Sir Humphrey, Colonel York, and the Squire being first and foremost in this matter. But for a few awful moments it seemed as though the flames must swallow up everything, and the paralysed children, wild with terror and pain—for many of them were rather badly scorched, and some of them really burned, though not in a serious or dangerous way—were with difficulty extricated from the flimsy stage trappings which were falling about them in masses of flake-like fire.

York, however, in his capacity of clerk of the works, had so arranged matters that the water-tank at the top of the house could be utilised at a moment's notice in case of need, and scarcely had the cry of fire been raised, before a deluge of water was falling upon the blazing stage, and was hissing fiercely through the woodwork overhead, where sullen tongues of flame were seen to be licking like the tongue of some fierce devouring animal.

Through the fire, the steam, the tumult, strong men and eager women rushed, snatching the children out of peril, carrying them into the shelter of the stone walls of the house, which the quickly-extinguished flames were powerless to touch. White-faced mothers caught at their little ones, eagerly bearing them off into lighted rooms, where their condition could be examined into, and uttering for the most part exclamations of thankfulness at finding how little harm had been done, beyond the scare and the destruction of pretty flimsy fairy frocks.

Sally, her new dress scorched and torn, her face blackened, her hands red and blistered, carried out one of the last of the little ones, who had dropped behind some falling woodwork, and had been stunned by a blow on the head, so that he might have sustained severe hurts had not Sally's quick eyes detected him where others had seen nothing. It was little Hugh whom she thus rescued, and Stella, uttering a cry of relief, made a rush forward to receive him.

"I was getting so frightened. I knew he was behind the scenes. He was wanted for the next picture. Oh, Sally, you don't think he's badly hurt?"

"Oh, no; I hope not. See, he's had a bad knock on the head, poor little chap; but I don't think he's burned anywhere. There was a great lot of water pouring down close to him. It was splendid how the water came hissing down before one could say 'Jack Robinson'! But for that it might have been frightful. See, we'll put him on the sofa here. He'll come to directly. Miss Lynne has the little ones who have been hurt. She knows just what to do; and the rest are to go in to supper, and be made to eat and drink and forget about it if possible. It's much the best way. It's a great mercy it was no worse. I wonder however it happened. Everything was so carefully arranged to guard against any danger of fire."

Sir Humphrey, rather blackened by smoke, but quiet and composed, and even smiling, paused for a moment at the door and looked in.

"It's all safe now," he said; "the fire quite under, and nothing spoilt but the temporary structure, which must have come down anyway. What about the children? Any more been hurt? That's Hughie from the Rectory. What's the matter with you, my man?"

Hugh opened his eyes and stared about him, and sat up.

"I'm to be Jack the Giant-killer next," he said; "have I been to sleep?"

Sir Humphrey smiled, felt his small limbs all over, and finally set him on his feet.

"You'll kill giants yet, my man; though a big giant called Fire did have a hit at you just now. But he's not done you much harm. Do you feel like having some supper, eh?"

Hugh felt quite like it, and the girls followed him and Sir Humphrey into the supper room, where Diana, in all the undimmed beauty of spotless raiment and unsinged drapery, was surpassing herself in trying to make fun and nonsense for the little folks, that they might forget the fright they had had, and carry away nothing but pleasant impressions of Sir Humphrey's Christmas party.

The mothers who had remained with their little ones were in another room with Esther Lynne, busy over the few little sufferers who had really been hurt by the fire, or were too much upset to join in the feast. But since by far the larger number had only seen the sudden fall of the fire upon the stage, and had been whisked away almost before they had grasped whether it were a real catastrophe or a part of the play itself—a clever make-believe—they were not seriously upset, and a very little coaxing and fun on the part of those about them caused them to forget their incipient fears, and be ready for whatever was proposed.

Di's face was pale beneath its brightness, and her expression was curious. Any but children would have known her mirth to be strained, and neither Sally nor Stella was surprised that it should be so. Thankful as they themselves were that the threatened tragedy had been averted, and that so small an amount of real harm had been done, they could not forget the awful moment when it had seemed to them as though the whole place might be engulfed in flames, and that nothing could save a number of children from terrible injury, and perhaps a frightful death. If Di had also shared this fear, it was no wonder she looked like that. But the curious thing was that she had so preserved her spotlessness of adornment.

She had certainly been behind the scenes at the moment of the fire. She must have been one of those who had rushed to the aid of the children in their peril—she, so strong, so quick, so courageous, and so level-headed on all occasions. How, then, had her dress retained its glistening whiteness and its undimmed purity? That was certainly a puzzle; but then Di was a wonderful person, who always did manage to look different from others.

Sir Humphrey put his hand upon her shoulder and smiled.

"This is very good of you, my dear," he said. "We have all been so busy elsewhere; but this is capital. We must not let our little folks go away with doleful face and scared brains. Thank God! no great harm has been done, and no one is badly hurt, though I fear a few of the little ones will have something to suffer. I must go and see how things are going there. You will keep them happy here, will you not? The carriages and flies do not come till nine o'clock. Perhaps we can organise some games to keep them amused till then. You will do what you can till then?"

Sally followed Sir Humphrey out of the room.

"Your hand and arm are burnt," she said. "You must let Miss Lynne see to you. She has done all that is wanted for the children. I'm going to ask her to bind up this finger of mine, and she'll do the same for you, too, if you'll come."

"My child," he said, concerned, "are you hurt?"

"It didn't begin to hurt till just now. It smarts a bit; but it'll be all right when I get an oiled rag round it. You've got a worse burn yourself. Look at your coat-sleeve."

"I expect the coat-sleeve has saved the arm. I'm sorry you are hurt, my dear. I feel horribly guilty over the whole thing. But wait one moment," he added suddenly, stopping and retracing his steps; and he made straight for Diana.

"My dear," he said, "I find that several of the rescue party have suffered in the cause. Tell me, have you any burns that should be looked to?"

She turned her face full upon him with a curious intensity of gaze that was almost wild.

“Are you mocking me?” she asked fiercely—despairingly as it almost seemed.

“My dear child, what do you mean?”

“Mean? I mean that the moment I saw the danger—and I think I saw it first, before anybody else—my one and only thought was to save my own skin. What did it matter what anybody else suffered, if only I got safe away out of that horrible place, which was going to be a flaming furnace in a moment. I raised the cry of fire, and I fled for my life, without a thought for others. That is me all over, Sir Humphrey—you may as well know it first as last. I turned tail and ran. I never came out again until the danger was all over; and you ask me whether I have suffered in the cause of my self-devotion!”

He looked at her searchingly for a moment, and then said very gently and kindly:

“My dear child, there is many a brave soldier who has felt, when first exposed to fire, that temptation to turn tail and run. Some have even done it—who have lived to make ample reparation afterwards for what is often just a trick of the nerves. And I think it needs as much courage often to realise and confess to an act of timidity as it does to face a peril.”

He said no more. It was neither the time nor the place, but his smile was very friendly as he looked into her face, and Diana made an effort to smile in reply, though the bitterness and strain of her expression yet remained.

She saw the children through their supper; she drafted them off to the drawing-room, where Archie and Rudolf had hastily improvised together a bit of comic acting and conjuring, to finish off the evening for those who remained, the injured children having by this time been quietly removed to their homes. Several mothers had been present, who had undertaken

this duty, and no child was too much hurt to be moved. In fact, no one had been severely injured, though one or two had been badly scared, and had suffered rather large superficial burns. It was with great sense of thankfulness that all those who had witnessed the sudden and alarming incident realised how small had been the harm done considering the magnitude of the peril. A real tragedy had been imminent, but by promptitude and presence of mind it had been averted; and from the sounds of laughter and the clapping of hands constantly breaking out from the crowded drawing-room, it was abundantly plain that the spirits of the children, damped for a moment, had risen again almost to their former pitch.

But Diana did not follow the little crowd to the drawing-room. She turned and passed rapidly through an ante-room beyond into the dimly-lighted library, which was the one spot that had not been disturbed, or utilised for the evening's entertainment. Two shaded lamps burned there, giving a faint illumination, and a red fire of glowing coal made a cosy spot of warmth and brightness.

Diana scarcely looked round her; her mind was in a strange tumult; she flung herself down upon a great, deep, leathern-covered couch with something very like a deep groan, and she buried her face in the cushions, speaking muffled, incoherent words half aloud, as we do sometimes, when we think ourselves alone, under stress of some keen emotion.

But her senses were sharp enough notwithstanding her self-abandonment, and almost at once she heard a slight sound which made her start up and gaze round, and immediately her glance fell upon York's tall figure, as he was making his way slowly and quietly towards the door.

In a moment she grasped the situation. He had been in the room when she entered. He had seen her, though she had not seen him, and now he was trying to get away, that she might have the place to herself. He had witnessed the external

signs of this outbreak of abandonment, and was desirous that she should not know it.

Diana started to her feet. In the uncertain light they faced each other. She saw that he was unwontedly pale, with dark shadows beneath his eyes. He had removed the traces of smoke and grime from his face and person ; but he looked like a very exhausted man. She knew very well that it was mainly owing to his marvellous promptitude in action that the flames had been so quickly arrested. What he had done exactly she did not know ; but, at any rate, he had not spared himself, that was evident.

"Don't go," she said, recovering herself by a great effort. "I expect you came here to rest and be alone—as I did. Can I get you anything? You look about done for. I know I'm not much good in an emergency—I've found out that ; but I think my courage will stand the strain of getting you a glass of wine, or a brandy and soda."

The exceeding bitterness of her tone was not disguised by its lightness. York turned back, and looked at her with attention.

"Thank you, please do not trouble. My man has done all that for me. I am all right, Miss Conquest. What is the matter with you?"

"The matter is, that I know myself to be an unmitigated coward, and that I despise myself from the bottom of my heart !"

"Because you ran away from the fire?"

"Did you see me?"

"Yes ; we both started to run together. I thought at first you were making for the water-rope. If I'd been sure you knew how it acted, I should have left it to you and turned back."

"Yes, to run on to the burning stage, and rescue the children—as you did later—as Sir Humphrey and Archie and all the men did, as Sally and Stella tried to do, and did

partially, though the men tried to stop them, lest their draperies should catch fire too ; as Esther did, without anyone knowing or seeing, because they could think of others, and care nothing for themselves, if the children could only be snatched from an awful peril. I only thought of the horrible pain.—What should I do if I were overtaken by those awful tongues of fire?—if I should lose my beauty, my strength, all that I hold most dear?—if I should have to suffer horribly? It drove me wild, the very thought. Oh ! I knew perfectly that I was strong, active, daring—when I chose to be—that I could do almost as much as a man in the work of rescue ; but was I going to do it ? Not a bit of it ! All I thought of was to save my own skin. If I did that, I did not care who else might be burned to death ; the whole house might go ! ”

“ Miss Conquest, you are unjust to yourself. ”

“ I am not ! I am not ! I wish I were. I am seeing myself as I am for the first time, with all the glamour and self-adulation stripped away. Colonel York, sit down. You are not fit to stand. I will sit down too, and have my say out. I must have it out with someone. Sir Humphrey would not understand ; no doubt he thinks most women are like that—lose their heads in a moment of panic, and are not responsible exactly for what they do. But that’s not it at all. I did not lose my head. Never was my mind clearer than when I suddenly saw the flaming draperies beginning to fall upon the children grouped below. If I had made one spring, I could have got two or three out in a second—the very ones who have been most hurt—but I should have run the risk of being hurt myself. I realised that instantly—and I ran away ! ”

York had sunk down once more into the deep chair beside the fire. Diana sat opposite, very upright, with a tense and rigid aspect, and brightly-gleaming eyes.

“ And all my life through I have been priding myself upon my courage, my presence of mind, my promptitude in emergency. I have always said to myself that should

occasion arise I should show that I had the true heroine nature. I have longed for my chance to come to prove what I was made of, that men might see and admire and applaud. And now I have had my chance. I have been tried in the balance, as they phrase it; and the result has been that I have shown myself a pitiful coward. Even Stella Sinclair, whom I have looked down upon (oh! I beg your pardon, I had forgotten the relationship; but never mind, you cannot think worse of me than you do now)—looked down upon as a namby-pamby sort of little prim miss—even she has put me to shame to-night. I shall never hold up my head again in this place. Even the children may well point the finger of scorn at me. And the sooner I get myself out of it the better.”

She had said her say, and York lay back, regarding her steadfastly, astonished at the outburst, amazed at the fierceness of her self-contempt, and at the ruthless fashion in which she had torn away the veil, and contemplated herself without a rag of self-deception. It was almost like seeing a living thing dissected. He longed to interrupt her, and yet felt it better to let her have her say out. He wondered why she had spoken thus openly to him, whose acquaintance with her had not been intimate, though in spasmodic fits and starts she had shown him favour and some amount of confidence. After a very brief pause she looked him full in the eyes, and said :

“Since hearing from Sir Humphrey the story of your life, I have always regarded you as one of the bravest men I have ever known or heard of. Do you know, I had even time in that moment to think of you, and what your bravery had cost you; and I said to myself it was all very well for a man, but that I wasn’t going through that sort of horror—no, not for anything!”

She threw herself back in her chair, and gazed at him with eyes that seemed to blaze through the dim glow of

lamps and firelight. And at last he spoke in his low, even tones.

"Miss Conquest," he said, "as you have brought me into this, I should like to tell you how much you sometimes remind me of what I was once."

"How?" she asked, with eager interest.

"Partly in your very pride of life, and strength, and beauty," he answered. "Do you know that once I was a very handsome man?"

"You are still!" it was on the tip of Diana's tongue to say; but he had not asked the question to get an answer, and continued speaking without a break.

"I can say it now without vanity—but so it was. Before I was crippled I was very tall, too, over six-two, and with a strength that is not always the accompaniment of extra inches. I thought I was going to take the world by storm. People talk of the vanity of women; but I often think that it sinks into insignificance before the insensate vanity of men. We have sex pride, as well as the other forms of vanity—the sense of being the lords of creation, made to be worshipped and bowed down before. I had no great desire to marry. I had loved passionately—ridiculously, perhaps—as a mere boy; and I could not afford marriage, nor did I particularly desire it. My sword, my horses, my position in a dashing cavalry regiment was enough for me. Wherever I went I was noticed and made much of. I thought no life could be so pleasant. I desired none other."

Diana listened with parted lips and wide-open eyes. How well she understood! Strange that this quiet man, with the halting walk and the lined, brown face, with its underlying pallor, should understand her so well, should have passed through some like experiences in his life.

"I never thought myself a selfish, conceited ass. I thought myself a very fine fellow. The world was good to me; I got on well in my profession. I was chiefly in India; the life

suited me, and so did the pay and the climate. I was always ready, if we were ordered home, to exchange with any officer of my standing who wanted home service, and I stopped out. I wanted to save money, and perhaps one day to marry money and settle down at home as a country gentleman. But, meantime, I was very well content as I was. It never occurred seriously to me that my life could ever be anything but a brilliant success, with a brilliant climax.”

Diana caught her breath, and listened in deep silence.

“Well, last year came the end of all that sort of dreaming, and I had time to discover what my real worth was—what was the value of all the flattery and adulation I had received. Was it the friends who had made most of me when I was an amusing guest at their parties, or could ride their polo ponies to win, or do those things that make a splash in our little station-world, who were any good to me when my career was over, and I was only a mangled, helpless bag of bones, with a very slender chance of ever pulling through again to a crippled sort of life? Not a bit of it. It was the chance—or Providence, as I like to call it—of Sir Humphrey Vanborough’s being our way on business of his, to which I owe my life. He took me up, and in his bungalow, watching him and talking with him, I began to see a vast number of things I had never understood before, the chiefest of them being my own insignificance and worthlessness, and the worthlessness of a great variety of those things which I had set such store by before. It’s got to come to that, Miss Conquest; we’ve got to learn our own insignificance, and then the rest comes bit by bit. As long as we are our own idols, whether consciously or unconsciously, we shall never be any good, either to others or to ourselves.”

He said no more. Di spoke not a word. She sat looking silently into the heart of the fire. And thus they were found by Sir Humphrey and Esther, who, missing Di when the

little people had gone away, came to look for her wherever she might be found.

"I thought you must have run home, dear," said Esther; and Diana, rising in her sudden fashion, threw her arms about her now.

"Take me home now, Esther, take me home now; I am so very, very tired. I want to be with you at home."

CHAPTER XXVII

AN ACT OF HUMILIATION

IT was New Year's Eve, and many persons in Cleethorpe were busy over an entertainment for the school children which was to be given that evening. But although Diana had promised them a song, she was not engulfed, as some were, in the cutting of bread-and-butter, or the arrangement of the rooms. She had been sitting alone over the fire for some while, until the early dusk began to fall; and then suddenly rising and throwing on her fur-lined coat and fur cap, she sped with swift steps up the wide yew avenue, lying ghostly beneath a slight sprinkling of snow, and only paused at the door of Nun's Bower, asking whether Sir Humphrey Vanborough was at home, and whether she could see him alone.

As it chanced, he was at home, and in the library alone. Diana seldom entered that room, and as she crossed the threshold she was conscious of a strange thrill, remembering the last occasion on which she had been there, when she had spoken such passionate truths to Colonel York, and had received some answering confidences from him—confidences which she had pondered over in secret ever since, wondering more and more at the marvellous patience and silent heroism of the man who had partially laid bare his soul to her, that she might (as she now began to understand) draw, in some measure, consolation and hope from his experiences. He had lost all he most valued once, but had found the secret of contentment. If he, why not she? She had been asking that question ever since. She had not found the answer yet; but she was feeling

for it in a blind, unconscious fashion ; and this visit was one of the consequences of that search.

Sir Humphrey rose to greet her, a question in his eyes.

She answered it before it had been put, as the door closed upon the retiring servant.

"No, nothing is the matter—and yet something is. That is what has brought me ; but it's nothing that you are trying to guess. It is about Esther !"

He started, and an anxious look clouded his gaze. He motioned Di to be seated ; but he stood himself in a rather tense attitude.

"Is anything wrong—with—Esther ?"

He generally spoke of her as "Miss Lynne," though to each other in private they had used the familiar Christian names of childhood. There was a note in his voice which betokened some disturbance of mind, and his keen gaze rested upon the girl's face, which showed a certain nervous excitement.

"Please, sit down," said Di, looking straight before her, and not at her interlocutor, as was her fashion. "It's nothing that you fancy. Esther is not ill, or anything like that. There is nothing the matter with her but what you can put right."

"I ?"

"Yes, you. I'm not afraid to speak now ; because I've got eyes in my head, and I've been using them to better purpose lately. Sir Humphrey, you want to marry Esther Lynne !"

He started. He looked at Diana, and then his gaze travelled back to the fire, and fixed itself upon the glowing coals. In a low and reverent tone he made reply.

"God knows how I have wanted that all my life ; but if it is one of those things which must not be—and is better for her not to be—I can bear it."

"And suppose it were just the thing which were wanting to make her life happy and complete ?"

He rose suddenly to his feet. His tall form seemed to gather height and elasticity.

"What do you mean, Diana? Child, child, do not play with me. You have been a loving and tender friend and niece to her, and I have loved you for it. You warned me once, and I thought you were right. And I had so little to offer—I have so little still. And there is another reason; but of that we need not speak. It has been the fear for Esther which has held me back. See, I am not afraid to tell you so—you, whose quick eyes have seen so much—have read my open secret. Her welfare, her happiness—these are the things we must place first. Our friendship is very sweet. If it would trouble her to have its current ruffled—"

"I don't believe it would." Diana was drawing her breath now in rather heavy gasps; seldom had she been so moved in spirit. Her task was to the full as hard as she had anticipated. "Please will you sit down whilst I try to tell you? I have not been a loving and tender friend to her; it has all been hollow show and pretence. No, not the love—don't interrupt me, please. I have loved Esther as well as it has been in me to love anybody, but I have always loved myself best. If you have not found that out, Sir Humphrey, it is because of the goodness of your own heart. Other people have known it well enough. I have always known it myself."

"That is the best safeguard, my dear," he said gently.

He did not know what was coming; but he saw she was greatly moved. She was doing something heroic, in spite of strong distaste and repulsion. He would not interpose. She should have her say out.

"It ought to have been; but it was not. Some people are self-deceived all through; but I always know myself at the bottom. I warned Esther before ever I came to her that I was not as attractive as I could appear. But she would not be warned. She has believed in me, and has loved me all through—she does so still. She will go on doing so, though I may tell her all the truth, as I am going to tell it first to you."

"And you will live to thank God, my dear, as we men do, for the tender blindness and trusting love of a true woman's heart. But for such women as Esther Lynne in the world, I often wonder what would become of us and of it."

"I begin to thank God already for Esther's love," spoke Di, with an odd little catch in her voice. "It's just the sheet-anchor that holds me—that has held me from making a bolt of it these last weeks, as I have done before when I have tangled things up, and seen myself afresh in all the beauty of my unadorned selfishness and heartlessness. No, Sir Humphrey, just hear me out, and let me get it over and done with. I can never rest till I tell you, and if you hate and despise me afterwards I cannot blame you. When first you came back, I did want you to marry Esther, though (idiot that I was!) I thought it all rather ridiculous—as though love were a prerogative of youth. I know now that it's the love of the old that is worth having—love that has served its apprenticeship, and has been tried in the fire. As I say, I rather wanted to see the end of the long courtship, and expected things to be rushed in a few weeks. When that didn't happen, then I began to have other views. I found out that you were a very attractive man, Sir Humphrey. I had been used to monopolising the attentions of attractive men. I began to monopolise yours. It was not a great step from that to begin to contemplate winning you away from Esther."

"My dear," he said gravely, "I do not like to hear you say such reckless things. Of course, I have been young myself, and I have had my moments of vanity and folly. I know the kind of thoughts which can suggest themselves in the hey-day of our youth and immaturity. But these do not represent our sober selves. I think they are better forgotten—buried in oblivion."

"Perhaps—so. I should like to forget them; but let me just have it out now. I began to think I wanted to marry, and you were the man out of all the 'show,' as I said, whom I

liked the best. I liked the sound of Lady Vanborough. I liked the prestige which, as your wife, I thought I should win. Oh, I know you must hate to hear me; but I want you to understand. It was not love, though I always liked you so much. It was ambition—and it was jealousy! Yes, indeed, there was that, too! I'm not jealous like some women. I never hated Esther or wished her away. In some ways I loved her all the more, the more I tried to supplant her. But I could not bear that she should be first with you. I wanted that place for myself. And when I saw I could not get it by square means, I tried what a little diplomatic fibbing would do."

"My dear!"

"It is true. Sally gave it another name—like herself, square and strong and downright. Odd, isn't it, that she's the one person who has seen through my little game? I persuaded you artfully, and without seeming to touch actually upon marriage, that Esther was not fit for any change in her surroundings, that any uprooting of her life would be bad for her. I made the most of her little illness. I worked upon your chivalry, as I worked upon your blindness in trusting me. You never suspected. Sometimes I almost deceived myself, and said it was sober truth, and that Esther was happier as she was. But all the while, deep down in my heart, I knew I was playing my own selfish game, and that what really was the matter was that I could not bear for anybody to stand before me. And now I cannot rest without eating my words to you, Sir Humphrey. I hardly believed them when I spoke them, though I tried to persuade myself that they were true. Now I know they were not, and that Esther has no more changed than you have. You have been her ideal through life, as she has been yours. It is beautiful. I lie awake at night sometimes thinking of it, and wondering how such things can be. We talk of romance, when a boy and girl just out of the nursery think they are in love. Pah! any child can fancy that!

But it's the love that goes on and on, and braves all obstacles, separation, and trouble, which is the love of true romance. Once I do not think I should ever have believed in it. But I have seen it now. I cannot help believing it. And to my shame I have tried to thwart and oppose it."

Sir Humphrey rose, and crossing over the intervening space, laid his hand lightly upon Diana's bowed head.

"My dear, if you have made a mistake, if you have acted thoughtlessly, you have had the courage to make noble reparation. I know it has been hard. I thank you from my heart for your confidence in me. Believe me, Diana, no word of this shall ever pass my lips. It shall be the one secret which I shall keep from—my wife"—there was a little tremor in his voice—"if the day shall come when I can have the joy of calling Esther Lynne by that name."

Diana looked up into his face, and saw it transfigured by a light which she had not seen there before.

"I shall probably tell Esther myself," said she, with a faint little flickering smile; "but I think I knew before you spoke that you never would tell."

"I am going to Esther now," he said; "shall I find her at home?"

"She said she would be in at dusk. May I stay here a little while?"

"As long as you like, my dear." He paused a moment, went towards the door, then paused, and turned round. "I hope to have you for my niece before long, Diana; will you antedate that moment by a short time, and give me the kiss of peace?"

She sprang up with a quivering face. His trust in her, and his calm affection after all he knew of her weakness and folly, fell like balm upon her heart. She swept across the room towards him, and held up a quivering face.

"Uncle Humphrey! Uncle Humphrey!" she cried; "I

never had an uncle before. You will forget all my folly and vanity, and let me be a real niece to you?"

He kissed her as a father might, and said :

"God bless you, my child. Let us put aside as forgotten everything but this : that you have helped at the last to clear up all doubts and misgivings, and to bring Esther and me together."

He walked out into the clear cold evening, his heart beating as the heart of youth. True, there was still one shadow ; but if she loved him, need he think too much of that ? He would use every precaution, and hoped before long to have unravelled the plot and have the criminal at his mercy. At least, such a woman as Esther would rather know the depth and measure of his love, whatever the future might hold for him or her.

Diana remained behind, seated by the fire, lost in thought, and with the rather weary feeling which succeeds a long strain.

It was done now. She had made that confession which for a week she had resolved upon, but which it had needed all her courage and resolution to accomplish. It was made, and had been received with that kindness and gentleness which she had come to associate with Sir Humphrey's nature. He did not hate her. He did not even despise her. She had not lost him as friend or kinsman, and as lover he had never been hers. She had always known that.

The door opened, and a servant appeared, bringing in the tea equipage and the lamp, and the second time he was followed by York, who, upon seeing the occupant of Sir Humphrey's chair, paused in surprise, and looked round the room.

Diana's spirits returned to her with the rebound natural to one of her temperament after a season of depression.

"No, I'm not a ghost, and Sir Humphrey isn't here. He's gone off to see Esther, and as I've a sort of feeling that I might be *de trop*, I've stayed here. Shall I do the honours of the table ? I really can make tea, though I always leave it to

Esther at home. Is Archie coming in? or is he away to Bishop's Hall?"

"I fancy Miss Sally has him in tow somewhere," answered York, smiling; "or, perhaps I should say, he has hitched himself on to her. We don't see much of him here these days. But I'm not sorry he's out this afternoon, as things are turning out, as I rather particularly wanted a little private talk with you, Miss Conquest."

Diana looked up with slightly heightened colour. She had not seen York alone since the evening of the fire, when they had both spoken with rather curious unreserve. What could he have to say to her to-day?

"I've got an idea that that fire was the work of an incendiary," he said.

"Gracious!" cried Diana, sitting up. "Who on earth could it be?"

"The same person, I take it, that wounded Sir Humphrey, and has tried to do other mischief. The creature who began by playing ghost here, and who has been seen once or twice lately, though he is much more wary and cunning now that we are watching, and have our wits about us."

"The Hindoo?" asked Di, who had heard something.

"I suspect so. I believe he was about that night. One or two children declare that they saw something like a dark man in a turban, but thought it part of the show, as you may say. I believe his hand kindled the fire, and that he waited his opportunity to try in the confusion to get a blow home. But things went differently from what he expected. There was less panic and more help. He was afraid in the end to show himself—except furtively lurking in dark corners. But he is still about, I believe."

"But what is he, and where does he stow himself? A man in a turban and Oriental dress cannot hide in a little village, and Cleeport is too far away to go backwards and forwards in winter weather, one would think."

"There is never any answering for what those Hindoos will accomplish when on the war-path. They are the cunningest and most slippery of customers. But my impression strongly is that he has an underground lair of his own, though hunt as I will I cannot discover the entrance. Miss Conquest, do you know if you have any cellars under Convent House?"

"Oh, heaps! It's a regular catacomb, I know. But you don't surely think he hides there?"

"No; but I have been wondering whether there is not some subterranean passage possibly connecting the two houses. If this fellow has discovered the end here, which baffles me, and has a den of his own under our very feet, we might be able to hunt him out from the other end, if only we could find it. Do you think Miss Lynne has any suspicions of such a sub-way? You know they were common enough in mediæval days, and it is quite probable something of the kind exists. But I particularly don't want to arouse fears or anxieties by asking odd questions."

"I'll find out!" cried Di, with energy. "I can do that without letting the cat out of the bag. If she doesn't know anything about it—and I shall easily find that out—then I'll have a hunt through the cellars myself. If there is one, most likely there'll be some sort of a door between our end and the cellars. I should just love to discover the secret. And if my unassisted genius isn't equal to the task, I'll smuggle you in, and we'll hunt together."

"I fear I can't take much credit to my own astuteness in such matters, since I'm quite baffled at this end, though I'm almost certain there must be at least a couple of outlets within a short radius of the house, if not within its precincts. I'm convinced that a certain peculiar sound I hear not infrequently, which we call rats, has another origin, and that there's some living creature moving about below, sometimes very close below our feet—a human creature, I am almost positive, and I believe Sir Humphrey begins to have his

suspicious also. We are taking every precaution. I think the lurking foe feels that. He is as slippery as all his kind are, and as dangerous. But my idea is that, if we could approach him from the other side—from an outlet which may probably be unknown to him (for you have never been disturbed in any way, and he has no motive for molesting your peace)—we might take him by surprise, and effect his capture by strategy; and I have been wanting to speak to you of my suspicions, because I know that you will not be alarmed by the idea, and that you may be my most valuable ally in any further investigations.”

Diana’s face flushed with pleasure. Nothing could have come more opportunely to her at such a moment, and the implied tribute to her courage which York had paid showed her that he, at least, did not hold her for a coward, even though she had played the coward’s part upon one memorable occasion.

“I will help you all I know!” she cried; “I will have a real search the first moment I can get the chance, and that will not be long in coming!”

She smiled a little to herself as she thought of the pre-occupation of mind which was likely to be Esther’s these next few days. Her thoughts would be centred round Sir Humphrey. They would engross each other’s time and thought almost to the exclusion of all else. She would be free to carry on her own investigations. Perhaps at last, at last, she might have a chance of being of some use in the world.

York’s eyes were upon her. She felt the scrutinising glance, and turned and looked at him. The smile she met brought a curious flush of colour to her face.

“I must make one condition with you, Miss Conquest.”

“And that is?”

“That you carry no investigations too far alone; that you do not let your courage and high spirit lead you into possible peril.”

"Are you mocking me?" she suddenly asked.

"No; I am warning you against what is likely enough to happen. If you find traces of a door, if you find any method by which you think you can enter it, you must not do so alone. You must send for me, and we must act in concert. Will you promise me that?"

She looked at him, and answered by another question:

"What makes you think I should be likely to wish to face any danger alone?"

"The knowledge I have of your character," he answered.

"You think I have it in me—to be—brave?"

"I know you have."

"You do not despise me in your heart?"

"God forbid!" And the words were so earnestly spoken that the girl felt almost awed.

"I—I thought that you, at least, must always despise me—after last week."

He looked her full in the eyes.

"If I had to choose my companion for a moment of peril, and that companion had to be a woman, I would choose Diana Conquest before all others," he said.

She rose suddenly to her feet, and held out her hand.

"Thank you," she said simply; "I hope I should not fail you."

And before he well knew it, she had gone.

CHAPTER XXVIII

QUESTION AND ANSWER

DIANA had scarcely given him a thought since that Christmas night when, in meditating over her probable future, she had come to the conclusion that perhaps her best and wisest step would be to put an end to all further uncertainty, and to marry the Squire's son.

Since that day the pressure of other events, and the struggle going on in her own heart, had driven this matter from her thoughts. She knew that Rudolph was still in Cleethorpe; but she had not chanced to meet him. Her own mood had not been sociable. For almost the first time in her life she had held aloof from her kind. She had been engrossed in a fight in which they seemed to have neither part nor lot, and now, when she suddenly met Rudolf Hastings face to face in the grounds of Convent House, she started as at an apparition, for she realised that just at that moment she had been thinking of him, and wondering vaguely whether he were keeping away from her, or whether she should see him again before he left for London, as he was shortly to do.

They stopped short and looked at one another. It was a mild January day, with sunshine and soft skies, and the faintest first promise of spring in the air, although none doubted but that winter's grip must tighten again before any real advance were made. But for the moment there was hope and joy in the sense that the turn of the year had come; skylarks were mounting into the blue, carolling in their wild exuberance of exultation, and the waterfowl upon the

chain of fish-ponds were noisy and busy, disporting themselves with gay abandonment. Diana had been watching them with amusement as she paced to and fro, pondering many things in her heart. Now she stood still, and Rudolf before her, each scanning the other with rather significant intensity.

"Miss Conquest—Diana," he began, "a few months ago I asked you a question, and you put me off then, promising me an answer later on. Have I waited long enough yet? Is your answer ready?"

Diana's face had been of late something more pale than of old, but at this moment it wore a brilliant colour, and her eyes began to glow and sparkle.

"I fancy," she said, speaking slowly, and after a brief pause, "that it was more than one question you asked me; that, in fact, it was a good many kindred questions. Shall I recapitulate them?"

"If you will," he answered, his glance searching her face rather keenly.

"I think you asked me whether I were not ambitious; whether I did not love power, and would like in my future life to exercise power and influence in the world of politics. I think you asked me whether it would not be pleasant to me to feel myself a person of importance in that world. You told me of your own ambitions, and asked me whether I could share them. You asked me many kindred questions, and finally asked me whether I would be your wife?"

"That is true," answered Rudolph; "and you told me to come again for my answer when you had had more time to consider the matter."

"That is true," echoed Diana, who was still standing before him, tall and straight. "But there was something you also told me then. You told me that you loved me, and would make me happy if it lay within the power of man to do so,"

For the fraction of a second Rudolf was silent. Then he answered steadily: "I said that also."

She looked him squarely in the eyes. There was a curious glint in her own.

"Could you say the same to me to-day, Rudolf Hastings?"

He was silent, regarding her as keenly as she regarded him. They wore the look less of lovers than of fencers, taking each the other's measure before engaging in some combat, whether for jest or earnest.

Diana spoke first, and her lips curved to a curious smile as she asked, with almost merciless frankness:

"Do you wish to marry me to-day as much as you did when last we spoke together upon that subject?"

His silence was answer sufficient. She asked no more.

"That is enough," she said; "I do not blame you. You, too, have taken my measure. I have taken it myself. I have no cause of complaint. I give you your answer. I will not marry you. You had better go to Stella, and settle things with her."

He flushed suddenly. His eyes sought hers proudly.

"Do you think I have been paying court to two women at once?"

"If you had been," answered Diana, with most unwonted gentleness, "it would not have been for me to blame you. Those who live in glass houses must not throw stones. But I exonerate you from that. She was your boyhood's love, I know. But you were fairly 'off' with her before you came to me. Only I think upon the night of the fire your eyes were opened. When you saw her in danger—endangering herself for others—you knew what she was to you. We were all tried as by fire that night. We went through our ordeal—some to honour, some to dishonour."

"How do you know?" he asked, somewhat confounded, scarcely noting her last low-toned phrase. "I did not see you. I did not know what had become of you,"

"I took care of myself," answered Di, with a slight curl of the lip; "from a safe coign of vantage I watched all. My eyes were opened to a good many things that night. I think your eyes were opened too."

For a brief while he made no reply, and then he held out his hand.

"But we may still be friends, I hope. You never loved me."

"No; I sometimes think I have never loved anybody—except myself. But I once thought I liked you well enough to marry you—and make a splash in your world. It is a good thing you did not happen to return for your answer just then."

There was a curious light in her eyes, half of mockery—self-mockery perhaps—half of good fellowship. He was man of the world enough not to be disconcerted. Yet, all the same, he looked full at her as he began :

"Do you mean—?"

She interrupted him with a wave of the hand and a rippling laugh.

"I mean nothing; but you had better go to Stella. Tell her all—tell her everything, and see what happens. Then come to me to be congratulated!"

With that she gave him a nod, turned, and walked rapidly towards the house, whilst Rudolf looked after her so long as she was in sight, and then turned and made his way towards the Rectory.

Diana found Sir Humphrey with Esther in the boudoir, sitting opposite to her in a big easy-chair, with the air of a man who has the right to be there. The look upon his face was good to see. Each time that Diana's glance met the deep contentment and friendly kindness of his own, her heart bounded within her. He rose at her entrance, and kissed her on the brow. This was the privilege he had taken from the day upon which he and Esther Lynne had plighted their troth. To her it still seemed like the seal of forgiveness.

She was passionately attached to Sir Humphrey, and the thought of his becoming her kinsman indeed was a source of pure happiness.

As for Esther, she looked ten years younger already. The face had always been serene, and had preserved its delicate contours and colouring. Sometimes a look of sadness and wistfulness had appeared to age it for a while, but with the sudden dawn of a new era of peace and happiness the shadows seemed all to flee away, and some of the radiance of youth to return. Diana, noting all this, with her quick eyes and senses alert for observation, often felt a keen pang of remorse run through her as she realised that she had, by her insensate longing after the first place, delayed for a while the consummation of this well-earned happiness. But when she sought to speak to Esther about it, she was gently hushed and checked.

"Dearest, it was natural that you should be attracted by him. And how could he help being attracted by you? He loves and admires you almost as much as I do. It was better for us all that we should wait and see how things developed of themselves. Time was when I almost thought myself that it would go that way; and had it been for your happiness—and his—I should have been happy myself. Do not speak hard words about yourself, dear child. Some of your very faults and failings have been dear to me, for your mother's sake. I am glad and thankful, dearest Di, that you recognise them yourself now. You will fight against them, and be safeguarded in the future. But you must not let thoughts of the past trouble you. Perhaps had my happiness come to me too quickly—too immediately—I might have known some faint misgivings. I might have wondered whether perhaps—you—might have made him happier. But now we all understand each other so well. I could not ask for greater happiness. I would not have had things different had the choice been mine."

"You are quite too utterly sweet, Esther!" Diana had cried, her arms fast round Esther's neck; and in her immense love and admiration for these two lovers, who had shown such unswerving love and loyalty, such quiet devotion and life-long unselfishness, the girl was helped to a wider and deeper understanding of the true nature of love, and began at last, with prayer and earnest resolve, to seek to cut loose from the bonds of self-love and passion for power which had been her peril and her bane through life.

"I am like Undine," she once said to herself, "if I could love I should find my soul. I do love Esther—I love Sir Humphrey. But I know she would say there is another love that must come first, and that the story of Undine is an allegory. I think I do begin to understand in measure what she means. One feels the power of it in others—but, ah me! it seems so far away from one's own ken. One thing I have learned, however: I will never marry any but a good man—good in the downright, old-fashioned sense of the word. There are some old fashions that are worth all the new-fangled ones put together. I may be as modern as they make 'em myself, but I'll not have an up-to-date husband—not if I know it. I'll marry one of the good sort, or I'll live and die a maid, like old Queen Bess!"

Stella sought out Esther a day or two later, and sat at her feet, quivering and blushing, whilst she told her tale, and asked advice.

"What have you said to Rudolf, my dear?" asked Esther.

"I had to tell him that I cared for him—that I had always cared, really. Only there seemed so many things in the way once. And now I have said that we must not be engaged unless his parents give their consent."

"I think that was a right stipulation to make, Stella; but will there be any difficulty there?"

"Rudolf thinks not—I mean, in the long run; and the

Squire came this morning to my studio, and kissed me, and said he would like me for a daughter as well as anybody, after all; for I understood the old-fashioned ways, and should not turn the place upside down when I came to be the Lady of the Manor, as he called it. He said that we must give 'her ladyship' time to get used to the idea, as she has been rather ambitious for Rudolf, and had got the notion that he would marry Diana. Miss Lynne—tell me truly—I know she would be a much better match for him—"

"Not unless she loved him, dear."

"Ah! but—suppose she does?"

"I am quite certain she does not."

Stella looked up eagerly.

"Oh, are you really? I was half afraid. And she is so beautiful—I could never blame him. I couldn't bear for him to come back to me, and then find out he had made a mistake."

"You need not be afraid of that, Stella—not on Di's account. I am beginning to understand Di, as it took me a long time to do. She has liked Rudolf as a friend. She has admired him as a rising man, likely to make a mark in the world. But she has never loved him; and though he has been attracted by her, I do not think that feeling is one which can truly bear the sacred name of love."

"That is what he says," spoke Stella. "He has told me every single thing about it, and how it was Di who sent him back to me at the last, when he felt himself half bound to her. I feel ashamed now of some of the things I said and thought about Di. Miss Lynne, I have been very narrow and uncharitable, and I have been very foolish, too. Even now I am sometimes half afraid to take my happiness when it has come. But you do not think it is always the lower road, the happy one, do you?—as I used once to think and to teach."

"Need you ask me, my dear, when I am taking my own great and wonderful happiness so gladly and gratefully?"

“Ah! but you waited so long for yours! You served such a long, hard probation!”

“Long, perhaps; but not hard. I have been a very happy woman all my life. And, Stella dear, my probation, as you call it, was not my choice. I would have married Humphrey in my youth, and been a proud and happy woman in doing it, but a definite and God-given duty intervened; one that we both fully recognised, though we did not expect it to divide us so long. Nevertheless, it may all have worked out for our greater happiness now. We might have had to suffer more trying separation and greater anxieties had we married young than we have done now. And the happiness of the present seems to make up for all. Your happiness in this thing comes to you young. But if no obstacle separates you, why should you think to please God by inventing one for yourself? Do you not see how He has opened your way, and opened your eyes, too? Are you still desirous to make Him out a harsh taskmaster, rather than a wise and loving Father? He may see fit to send us troubles and sorrows for our good, and for our right training; but I can never see that it can be pleasing to Him when we reject the good gifts of His sending, or neglect the exercise of the talents with which He has entrusted us, on the ground that whatever we enjoy doing ourselves must on that account be wrong, and our happiness a snare. To me that shows a faithless and unloving spirit. We are not afraid to take good gifts from the hands of our earthly fathers, how much less from the hand of the heavenly Father, who cannot err, and who has doubtless some wise and beneficent reason for entrusting us with such gifts, whether in the matter of this world's goods, or of talents bestowed.”

“I know; I am trying to live into that faith. Uncle Donald says just the same. And, Miss Lynne, Rudolf wants me to go on with my drawing and painting. There is a sort of studio place in the garden of his house. He will have it

fitted up for me. He is proud of what he thinks my talent. I shall have lessons, and he is going to let me paint and exhibit, too, if I like. When he is an M.P. I shall do his portrait! Perhaps I shall get just a little bit famous myself some day! I don't mean that I think I am going to do wonders; but I may have my little success—Rudolf thinks I shall, and he likes the idea. He says that women who have talent are thought more of in society than just the ones who talk and 'pose,' as he calls it. I hope I shall not grow conceited; but I see how easily I can be spared from the parish now, and that has taken a good deal of the vanity out of me. I don't mean to get puffed up; but I do feel as though I shall have such a happy life, and Rudolf declares it can be a useful one too."

"I am very sure of that, my dear. No life is without its accompanying sphere of usefulness for those who walk with open eyes. You need never be afraid of not finding duties rising up before you, and I am sure that you will not lack either the needful self-denial, or the needful energy, for grappling with these when they come."

"It is nice of you to say so, Miss Lynne, and I hope it may come true of me; but I sometimes feel as though I had been very silly and priggish and conceited in the past, and that makes me half afraid of the mistakes I may make in the future."

"We all make mistakes, dear; and your mistakes came from over-conscientiousness, or what I might perhaps call morbid conscientiousness, and not from selfishness or carelessness."

"Still, I was very obstinate and self-willed," insisted Stella, "and I was quite certain that my own way was the right one, and I did rather look down upon others, though I didn't know that I did. I thought their standards low—"

"Perhaps they gave you some cause, dear; and we always have to guard against the danger of letting love and charity

blind us to the faults and failings of those about us. We can love them with all their faults ; but it does not do to be blind to them, else we may unconsciously sink our own standards instead of raising theirs."

"I don't think that sort of blindness was my danger," answered Stella, with a little smile. "I don't think I was at all blind in that way, except to my own faults and failings. And now I am so happy that I feel I want to love everybody, and for everybody to love me, and if I've been unjust and uncharitable to Di I must tell her of it. For I do want us all to be friends."

"Well, dear, there she is to speak for herself," said Esther, smiling ; and Stella, starting up, saw a tall figure outlined in the doorway, and next minute Di was in the room, and had swooped down upon her, and pulled her to her feet, giving her a warm embrace.

"There, then, little Stella ! We've been rather cat and dog all these months—you and I—haven't we ? But we'll bury the hatchet now in a general amnesty. Sometimes I wonder how you all came to treat an interloper so nobly as you did, especially one who was so eager to boss the show over all of your heads. But I've done with that sort of thing now—"

"Oh, no ; but, indeed, you mustn't say that. You must go on bossing it more than ever: Sally is going to be married quite soon—"

"Oh, yes ; I've been hearing talk of that. It's perfectly rich ! Sally is all for a quiet wedding, with no 'tomfoolery,' by which she means a wedding-dress and veil, bridesmaids, and a feast, and so forth. Lady Caroline, of course, wants the thing done in style, in the good old-fashioned way ; whilst the Squire is deliciously divided in mind, and they both play upon him according to his mood."

"How do you mean ?" asked Esther, smiling.

"Oh, don't you see ? Lady Caroline says that a white wedding is the right thing, and is backed by all the traditions

of generations ; but Sally deftly works him up on the other side (I didn't know the little puss had so much diplomacy in her), reminding him of how, when the butcher's and baker's daughters are married nowadays, the bells ring and arches go up, and the very carts and tumble-down flies have white favours and whip-knots ; and then the old lion rouses up, and he marches up and down the room, declaring that it's disgusting how every good old custom is being vulgarised, and how the people are vulgarising themselves by an absurd aping of their betters ; and that if every petty tradesman's girl is to have her trail of bridesmaids, her white gown and veil, her arches and ringers, then the sooner the gentry take to be married at eight in the morning, in travelling dress, the better for the country. And Sally joins in eagerly, and stirs him up with a long pole, and Archie sits and roars, and how it will all end I'm sure I don't know. But I believe Sally will get her way, and that we shall get up some fine morning and find that they've stolen a march upon us, and are off and away ; and really, after all, I don't know whether that wouldn't be the best way of settling the matter ; though I had rather set my heart upon being her bridesmaid." Diana paused, looked round her with a laugh, and then going up to Esther, dropped a kiss upon her brow. "Never mind, though ; if I'm done out of that, there is one thing I am not going to be done out of. I'm going to be your bridesmaid, Esther, whether you have the grandest or the quietest wedding in creation—so you may make up your mind to that !"

CHAPTER XXIX

THE SECRET WAY

"CAN you come? I think I have found something.—D. C."

A little twisted note bearing these words was put into York's hands by his servant soon after lunch, as he sat alone in the library. Archie was away in town for a few days, and Sir Humphrey was driving Esther out, a very favourite afternoon recreation of his when the sun shone and the air was not too keen.

York was already busy making some plans of his own for the future. Hitherto Sir Humphrey had declined to discuss the question of his leaving him. Month after month had slipped away; but the friendship between the two men had only deepened with time, and York had been able to appreciate his host's assertion that he would find solitary existence at Nun's Bower but a sorry experience. Archie was backwards and forwards, but was not to be depended upon even when resident. He was for ever across at Bishop's Hall, or joining in Sally's pursuits elsewhere. Sir Humphrey was the last man to wish it otherwise; but all the same, York felt that he depended upon him for companionship, which it had been his great pleasure to give.

Now, however, some speedy change was imminent. It was probable that Convent House would be the future home of Sir Humphrey and Lady Vanborough, and the former had said something vague and genial about York's remaining on at Nun's Bower—"keeping it from rats and ghosts and other pests"; but the soldier did not exactly see how he could do that

permanently, unless by insisting upon paying a rental which would be beyond his slender means. He was seriously contemplating taking lodgings somewhere in Cleethorpe for himself and his servant, and settling himself within easy reach of his friends, and then, if his health continued to improve, trying if he could obtain some light employment, for which his previous life might have been a training, though his career as a soldier was at an end.

His first and chiefest object, however, was to get at the heart of the mystery still shadowing his friend. The detective had made out a fairly complete case with respect to a Hindoo who had arrived in Cleethorpe some weeks prior to Sir Humphrey's coming, and had since been seen there at intervals, disappearing in the meantime utterly and completely. He had also closely cross-questioned every person in the village who professed to have seen the ghost lurking in the neighbourhood of Nun's Bower; and he had elicited from each in turn a description that might very well apply to the same turbaned Hindoo, surmising that the man was wrapped in some dark cloak, as most likely would be the case, from which the turban gleamed white and spectral. It was natural that this white head-covering should suggest the idea of a coifed nun; but the man believed as York did, that save on the occasion when Diana scared the village in her phantom boat, it was the Oriental who had each time been seen, though of late all trace of the man seemed to have disappeared. Either he had made off for a while, in fear at possible discovery, learning, perhaps, in the inscrutable fashion of his race, that some special effort was being made for his apprehension, or else lying in such close concealment that all efforts to track him down had so far failed.

The detective had now returned to town, being in demand for another case; but York was on the watch, and was to keep him informed if any discovery were made, and meantime both he and Sir Humphrey were very much on the alert, and as

both of them were well used to the slippery ways of the wily Hindoo, and had eyes of peculiar keenness, they were in hopes that the miscreant would either be caught or scared away before any further ill had been wrought by him.

But until this consummation had been brought about, York felt indisposed to make any move from his friend's house ; and no one was less anxious for this move to be made than Sir Humphrey himself.

It was, perhaps, a rather strange combination of circumstances which had caused Diana to be York's confidante and co-conspirator in this matter. She knew more than any other person, save those immediately concerned, what had already taken place, and what was believed probable in the future. And now, with her note in his hands, York lost not a moment in acting upon it. Five minutes later he was in the yew avenue, and was not surprised to see Diana flitting towards him, her face aglow with excitement.

"I believe I have found it—the secret door!" she said, as their hands met, but speaking with curious, low-toned caution, as though afraid of eavesdroppers even in this quiet spot ; "I have been hunting for long. The cellars are so extensive and so strange—like catacombs almost. I found that the best thing was to make a plan of them, taking the compass to be sure of getting the lie of the thing right.

"When I had done that, drawing them to scale, as my father once taught me, I compared them with a plan of the house that Esther has, and then I located the spot nearest to this yew avenue ; for I had a feeling that if a secret way exists, it runs under the avenue. All that has taken time ; but to-day I have been rewarded, I think. I have found a little door, hidden away behind some crumbling brickwork. I declare it gave me a turn when I got to it. I thought of all the horrid stories I had heard (I don't know whether true or false, some say one, and some another thing about it) about nuns being walled up alive, and I declare I half expected to see a

gruesome skeleton grinning out at me as I pulled down fragments of brickwork.

"I suppose the mortar was bad, or the work hastily done ; for I soon got a lot of it away. And then I saw that it had hidden a little door, and there was a great rusty key in the lock too ; but I could not turn it. I have some oil now ; but I remembered what you had made me promise about not going into any mysterious place alone. So I sent that line to you. I knew Sir Humphrey and Esther were safely out of the way for the afternoon, and that we had time before us ; and I think you and I will be a match for that wily Hindoo, even if we do chance to find the fox in his earth !"

Even as she spoke Diana put her hand into the breast-pocket of her thick pilot coat, and drew forth a little revolver, which she handled with the air of one who could use it at need.

"You know I can shoot !" she said, glancing at him with her old half-defiant smile ; for she had never felt quite certain that York had approved of her exploits with fire-arms.

"I have been glad to remember that—and that you promised me not to work even in your aunt's cellars without some defensive weapon upon you," he said ; "and now, Miss Conquest, if we are really about to try and run this fox to earth, as you call it, I think I will post my man somewhere over yonder, where we have reason to suppose his outlet must be ; for if he elude us—and he will, I imagine, sooner fly than fight—we had better be ready for him at the other end. Might I suggest that you should remain above ground with Dennis, leaving me to explore the passage, if we find it?"

"I cannot veto your suggestions," answered Diana, with sparkling eyes, "but where you go, I go. The secret passage, if we find it, is my treasure trove. I claim the right to be of the exploring party, and I don't see that we want anybody else. That is, if you are not afraid of what I may do. Of course, if you think that I should fail you at a pinch—"

Diana's face had suddenly changed; some of the colour lent by excitement and animation died out of it; a curious ring of pain was audible in her voice. York spoke with quiet emphasis:

"My fear is that you would endanger yourself too rashly, and my own lack of fleet movement renders me but an inefficient protector. It is the thought of the possible peril you may encounter, and your own intrepid spirit, which causes me to fear for you."

"My intrepid spirit!" repeated Diana slowly, "do you speak those words to me?"

"I certainly do."

"After what you know of me?"

"After what I know—and after what you have spoken of yourself—two very different things, let me tell you."

She looked at him with wide, wondering eyes. A curious magnetic flash seemed to pass from soul to soul, rendering explanation superfluous.

"Let us go together," said Diana, after a brief, pregnant pause. "Let your man be posted where you will; but you and I together will be enough for the unravelling of the mystery of the secret way. You are armed?"

"Yes; and I do not think we shall get to close quarters; the quarry will run sooner than fight, you will see. And yet—"

"I must come!" cried Di, with a touch of her old imperiousness; and in the end her will prevailed.

York laid his plans with precision and skill. It did not seem to him that if the wily plotter were anywhere in his lair, and if his lair were to be discovered now, he could well escape them. He would fain have insisted upon Diana's absence; but something in the girl's attitude overcame his scruples. If she were left behind now, she would never believe that he regarded her other than as stained by cowardice—that fear of personal peril, which had been rankling within her ever since

her self-betrayal and headlong flight upon the night of the fire. He understood her too well to combat her will now, though his instinct as a soldier was strongly averse to permitting a woman to face personal peril. Still, he believed himself fully able to protect her. He was a dead shot, and his presence of mind had never yet deserted him in any crisis of his life. He felt certain that only one man was concerned in this plot against Sir Humphrey, and he felt himself equal to tackle this one foe single-handed. So together he and Diana descended the long flight of cellar stairs, threaded their way through a curious network of underground cellars and passages, lighted by the lamps Diana had kindled in readiness, and finally they were brought up short before a narrow doorway, which almost defied detection, so cunningly was it set, and might never have been discovered, even when the brickwork had crumbled and fallen, had it not been for the rather curious fact that the ponderous key was still in the lock.

"I imagine the door was closed for some object; but it was intended to be used again," spoke York, as he carefully oiled and examined the wards. "Perhaps the key was thought safer in its own lock than anywhere else. Is that a bolt you are working at, Miss Conquest?"

"Yes; it is pretty rusty, but I think I am getting it to move. What good work they used to put into everything in old days. I declare I don't wonder the Squire rages at modern scamping and modern scrimping; and yet I don't know that I want to go back altogether to mediæval times. The world can be a very pleasant place, after all, and not altogether destitute of romance even now! I wonder what some of my friends would think if they could see me now, penetrating into the heart of the earth, through secret passages which hold some deadly secret mystery."

Diana's eyes were bright; her heart was bounding; she felt unaccountably gay and joyous. York was silently fitting the oiled key into the door, and after a certain amount of

manipulation the bolts shot back with a curious grating sound. Diana had by this time got her bolt to move, and the door swung open before their united pressure, revealing the mouth of what appeared to be a long, dark tunnel, which smelt strongly of bats and must.

"Whew!" whispered the girl, "it's like a charnel house. I should think we would release a whole army of boggarts!"

Yet she was not in the least afraid, but burning with curiosity; and at a sign from York she handed him the light, and pressed eagerly in his wake.

"Where bats can breathe, I think we can breathe," he said, in a low voice; "and there must be an opening to the outer air somewhere, or they could not get in. We shall see how our light burns as we move. Set another lamp in the opening, please, before we begin our march."

It was a long, long tramp they had; but by looking back they could see the wonderfully straight course they kept, for the glimmer of light they had left behind them still shone like a point of fire.

"It is so, then," whispered Di, in keen excitement; "there is a subterranean way corresponding with the yew walk, and that is why tradition tells of footsteps up and down, heard there when nothing is seen. The old folks of the place talk of that, though they don't profess to have heard it themselves. I suppose that was in the days of seminary priests or the Civil War, when subterranean passages and hiding-places were in demand."

York laid his finger upon his lips, and Diana's whispers died away. The quick senses of the soldier told him that they were approaching the termination of the passage, and that if they were to surprise the quarry at all, they should be likely soon to do so. The mustiness of the long dank passage was changing in character; another odour was gradually asserting itself. It was a flavour familiar enough to York—it took him back in memory to his days of wandering

upon the frontier, when he had often partaken of the hospitality of the natives. It was a smell of the East. He would have recognised it anywhere. They were not on a false track after all.

This was the lair of the wily Hindoo, who was on the track of Sir Humphrey Vanborough—patiently and stealthily awaiting the chance to spring upon him unawares like a murderous beast. The wonder was that, having such a lair, he had been so slow to strike ; but York knew the caution and patience of the Oriental. Time with him was a secondary object ; the first was to make sure of his victim, and hitherto they had taken considerable care that Sir Humphrey should not be alone. The precautions, though unostentatious, had been very real, and the unseen *lier-in-wait* had probably been aware of them, and had been stealthily biding his time.

Hushing their footsteps to almost perfect stillness—they had foot-gear which lent itself to silent treading—the pair crept onwards through the darkness, till their eyes were greeted by a faint gleam of light in the distance, which caused them to pause, and York, who was carrying the electric lamp, prepared to switch off the light.

“Give it to me,” whispered Diana, “you may want your hands free at any moment. When we have gone a little farther I will extinguish it. But there may be pitfalls in the path.”

He surrendered the light to her, and they crept onwards, recognising that they were nearing the end of the passage, and that there was some living human presence at hand. A little later and the gleam of light was bright enough to enable them to put out their own, and to advance towards the opening with hushed steps and beating hearts. It was evident that the opening was a sort of doorless doorway, which had been covered by a curtain or mat, which, however, let in a certain amount of light to guide them. The silence, however, was deep and unbroken, and they felt as though the slight sound

they made themselves must surely be heard, and would bring the lurking foe out upon them, like a tiger springing from its lair. York held his revolver in his hand, prepared for sudden attack, although he was still of opinion that flight would be more probably the line of action taken.

Then came the moment of tense expectancy, when they stood just on the other side of the hanging mat, listening, with senses strained to the highest point of tension, for what might be heard upon the other side. But only deep silence prevailed, and after a brief pause York slowly worked his shoulder through the narrow orifice, and looked within, Diana craning her head to see also, without too much displacing the hanging.

Then the silence was explained ; for the Hindoo lay in a deep sleep before the little fire of wood and charcoal which was burning, the fumes of which must have been carried off by some cunningly devised chimney, for there was no smoke to dim the air. They instantly recognised the man as the juggler of the regatta day, and the girl could now quite believe that it was his white turban she had seen on both occasions when she had been startled by the apparition which she had dubbed the phantom nun. She gazed upon him as he lay with a curious mixture of interest and of horror. But York, bidding her by a gesture remain where she was, stepped forward with a catlike noiselessness and quietude, and in another moment he would have had the sleeping prey at his mercy.

But just at that very moment the sleeper's eyes unclosed, and it seemed to Diana's astonished gaze that he almost possessed the power of making himself invisible, so astonishingly rapid was his movement. One instant he was upon the floor, to all appearances a helpless, sleeping man, the very next moment he was crouching for a deadly spring—not in front of York, but behind him. With an inconceivable swiftness he had sprung into darkness, and before York had time so much as to turn, the gleaming blade was whistling

through the air, the creature who held it was himself hurtling through the dim darkness, ready to bury the shining blade in his very heart or vitals from behind.

Assuredly York had been a dead man had it not been for the act of Diana. With a cry like that of a tiger, the girl sprang upon the lithe Hindoo. She had his arm imprisoned in her vicelike clasp, the knife was wrenched away and flung far into the darkness, where it fell with a shivering sound against the stones. But she could not hold her prey. Instantly he had twisted himself loose, and they saw him bound away in the blackness of the vaulted place they stood in, and seem to spring upwards towards the very roof in a series of goatlike bounds. Then suddenly a shot rang out, awakening every echo in the place. The man gave a curious yell, but it was one not of pain, but of triumph at having missed injury. Diana, who had fired in the heat of the moment, uttered a fierce exclamation of rage and disappointment; but the next moment another curious muffled cry smote upon their ears—a strange scuffling sound and a heavy fall followed. In the dim light they saw the fluttering garments and the white turban, as the man, missing his slippery footing, came headlong to the ground, where he lay for a moment a quivering heap, and then all motion ceased.

“Stand back, Diana,” spoke York, using her name unconsciously, though the girl realised it with a curious thrill. “It may be a ruse, though I do not think it. Anyway, it is not a sight for you. Wait where you are. I will see what has happened. Let me have the light.”

The white glare of the electric lamp gave a more brilliant illumination to the place. Diana, with a wildly beating heart, stood watching whilst York bent over the prostrate man. She had her revolver still in her hand, and her eyes were glued to the Hindoo, as though she still suspected him of the power to make another inconceivably rapid attack. He lay like a tumbled heap upon the stone floor, and York, after a brief

examination, straightened out the bent and twisted limbs, and taking a piece of drapery which might have been a cloak, laid it over the stiffening frame.

"He has broken his neck," he said briefly; "he is quite dead."

Diana's breath caught up in her throat. "I did not kill him?" she asked.

At the moment she had fired she had not cared whether she maimed or whether she killed. She was fiercely determined that the man should not escape; but now she felt a sudden horror in the thought that she might have taken a human life, however degraded a criminal's that life might have been.

"No, you did not touch him. I heard the bullet strike the rock. It is probable that your shot frightened him into missing his footsteps; but there is no wound upon him. He died from the fall."

Diana was silent. She wanted to get out of this place, with its still and silent inmate. There was relief in the thought that their unseen, lurking foe, with murder in his heart, would menace them no more; but she had never been in the presence of death before, and she wished to escape from it now.

"I wonder where he was going," she said; "see, there are some rough, slippery steps. Colonel York, will you hold the light whilst I climb carefully up? You need not be afraid. I shall not get into any danger. I want to see where they lead to. I believe we are under Nun's Bower!"

He held the light, and she climbed upwards with great agility, calling out sometimes that it was quite safe, only rather slippery in places. Then she vanished from his ken for a few moments, after which an excited voice came down to him, crying out:

"I'm getting at the heart of the mystery at last. I'm looking through two eye-holes in the drawing-room panelling straight into the room itself—just behind that hideous old idol!"

CHAPTER XXX

LOVE THE CONQUEROR

IT was in effect a secret hiding-place which they had found—one of those “priest’s holes,” as they were so frequently called in bygone ages; a cleverly-contrived aperture—little more than a closet—behind the panelling of the drawing-room, with a masked door, by which flight could be made into the outer corridor, as well as the trap-door descending to the cellar beneath. A piece of the panelling had also been fashioned into a narrow doorway which could be removed by the hider at will; but they guessed that this, as also the cunningly-made eye-holes in the ornamental work of the beaded panels, had been the result of patient toil and artifice on the part of the wily Hindoo, since the aperture which could be made was too small to admit the passage of any but a lithe, slim, crawling creature like himself, and was set low, where the heavy double console-table placed against the wall divided in the centre, leaving a gap near to the floor by which, when the panelling was removed, a catlike creeper could stealthily worm its way into the room. The eye-holes were on a higher level, and gave the spy a fair command of the room. It was an uncanny thought that some unseen and unsuspected watcher might often have been prying upon them from behind the weird-looking idol set upon the marble-topped table. Diana had felt the creepy sensation of watching eyes, and so had others, in that room, but had attributed it to the wide white and red orbs of the heathen deity. But now it seemed that there might well have been another cause at work.

The cave contained another outlet along a winding tunnel, emerging in the little gully close to the pool where Sir Humphrey had been wont to bathe. The entrance was so well concealed that it had defied the closest search, although the searchers had felt convinced that it must lie within a short radius of that spot.

The inquest and inquiry were conducted as quietly as possible. It was abundantly evident that the Hindoo, scared most likely by the search and close watching to which he had felt himself subjected, had been lying for some while in closest concealment, biding his time with the curious persistence and patience of his race. It was almost a miracle that he had not found his opportunity before, in spite of all precautions; but there were evidences that he had changed his tactics, and was about to abandon his Eastern methods for those of the West. For upon the cave's being searched, it was found that a quantity of gunpowder had been collected, bought evidently in small quantities at a time, to avoid exciting suspicion. It seemed abundantly evident that the man, having failed in his various attempts at assassination, was about to see what could be done by some blasting operations from underneath. No doubt, when he had secured sufficient powder, he intended to try and blow up the house and its inmates some night; whether purposing himself to escape, or to share the common doom, none could say.

He was dead, and the authorities deemed it well to keep the matter out of the papers, and as much of a secret as possible. All that the public ever knew was that a Hindoo juggler, who had been seen about the place once or twice, and had given some of the village people a fright, had been found dead in a cellar beneath Nun's Bower, where he had apparently been living secretly for a while. The village people gaped with wonder over the tale, but asked no further explanation, the ways of "blackamoors" being beyond their ken, so that no habits, however strange, need excite wonder or speculation.

Even Esther Lynne knew little more. Sir Humphrey did not desire that she should do so. He himself fully believed that with the death of this man—particularly if the matter was kept out of the papers—the peril to himself from the vengeance of some family, or tribe, would cease ; but of this he could not be absolutely certain, and he therefore had no wish to arouse any insidious fears in her mind.

“When we have been married a year,” he said, with a smile, to Diana, “then, perhaps, I will tell her. By that time, I think, we shall all be convinced that the death of yonder poor fellow closed the matter. We shall be able to smile together over it then. Now, whilst it is all recent, she would be anxious and afraid. My dear, do you know that we owe a great debt of gratitude to you ? It was you who found out the entrance to the cave—”

“Ah ! but it was Colonel York who set me on. It was he who thought out everything.”

“I know ; and it was you that saved his life by your own strength and daring at a most critical moment. Do you know, Diana, that knife of his was poisoned ? One scratch, and I should have lost the truest friend man ever had.”

Diana went very white. “Poisoned !” she exclaimed, and drew her breath sharply.

“Yes ; we had it tested. It was poisoned. My dear, when I think what you two risked that day in my service, I feel that I have no words strong enough to express what I feel. But it was too much—it was too much !”

Diana still looked white and shaken. Sir Humphrey, regarding her, saw a change in her since the events of the past twelve days.

“My dear,” he said, very gently, “tell me, what is the matter ?”

Suddenly she put her hands before her face, and the tears gushed forth. Strangling her sobs, she cried :

“He won’t die ! Oh, say he won’t die ! Tell me that it

isn't a scratch from that knife which has made him ill ! ”

For at this moment York was lying ill in his room. He had gone through the formalities succeeding their discovery, and had given his evidence at the inquest, and so forth. But either he had taken a chill in the cave, or something had happened later ; for almost immediately afterwards he had been sharply attacked by pneumonia, and for a few days his case had been critical. Even now there was a little anxiety respecting his condition, although he had taken a turn for the better, and was considered to be progressing favourably. But it had not occurred to Sir Humphrey till this moment to connect York's illness with Diana's pale cheeks and air of anxious restlessness. He had fancied her unnerved by the experiences through which she had passed ; but now a new and sudden illumination came to him, and instantly his hand was stretched out and laid upon hers, which trembled in his grasp.

“ My dear, you need have no fear on that score. The knife never touched York, thanks to your wonderful promptitude and unusual physical strength. This illness is simply pneumonia, and as you may perhaps know, he had a bullet through one lung that time he so nearly lost his life, which, of course, makes things a little more critical. But the danger is now considered over, and we have every reason to hope and believe he will make a good recovery. I hope soon to be able to let you see him. When he can get up and move into the next room wrapped in his dressing-gown, it will do him good to see a few bright faces. Stella is to be the first visitor ; but I think that you must be the second. For when he was delirious he spoke your name once or twice. It was the only one I heard pass his lips. Even in delirium he retains much of his reticence.”

The colour had come back to Diana's face. Her eyes began to glow. She looked into Sir Humphrey's, and asked :

"What did he call me when he did speak of me?"

"He called you Diana, my dear. I think I am not betraying trust in telling so much."

The light in her eyes grew brighter.

"Oh, I am so glad, I am glad. Then he must think of me as Diana, not as Miss Conquest!"

He had both her hands in his own. He drew her gently towards himself, and looked earnestly into her glowing, transfigured face. Diana knew that she was giving herself away—letting herself go—but she did so willingly, with a proud, glad certainty that she would not be misunderstood or despised.

"My dear," he said, with exceeding gentleness, "is it indeed—so—with you both?"

"Oh, Uncle Humphrey, Uncle Humphrey, it is—so—with me. I am not ashamed to say it! I am not afraid to tell you. You will not despise me for it. I never knew what it was before. I have played at it; I have seen others feeling it really; but I thought I should never, never know it myself. And now it has come! it has come—I don't know how or why!"

"Do we ever know how or why God's best gifts come to us, my dear?" asked Sir Humphrey, very gently. "Is it not enough that they do come from Him, and that we take them from His hand as the pledges of His fatherly love for us?"

The rare, rare tears sprang into Diana's eyes, and hung upon her long lashes like sparkling dew-drops.

"Oh, Uncle Humphrey, I should love to think of it like that! But, oh! if you could only know how unworthy I feel!"

"And it is when we feel our own unworthiness the most deeply, that our Father finds the way of bringing us nearer to Himself."

The tears dropped slowly one by one; but the girl would not free her hands to wipe them away; she held Sir Humphrey's closer and more close, as though that warm, fatherly clasp gave her a hold upon life and hope.

"Uncle Humphrey—I will try—indeed, indeed I will. But why did you speak of both of us? He cannot care; it is impossible. He has seen me all these months—so careless, so selfish—playing fast and loose, as the phrase is, with everything and everybody. He must despise me in his heart—"

"No, Di, my dear; never that. I think that York is too brave a man, too true a man, ever to despise a woman. He reverences them all; but he only loves one."

Her head drooped towards him; her face was glowing.

"Uncle Humphrey, Uncle Humphrey! do you really mean it? Oh, I do not know how to believe it!"

"Yet I think, my dear, that it is so; though I scarcely know if I should have told you. It is not my secret, and he has not spoken one word; but—"

"That is just it!" cried Diana breathlessly; "that is what I fear all along. He will not speak. You know how he feels about himself; that he is only the wreck of a man; that his career is gone; that he is a sort of useless hulk—"

"I know, my dear; and you must think of these things, too. You are young, and an exceedingly beautiful and attractive woman, and the world will have much to offer you. You have some ambitions; nor do I criticise you for that."

"Yes, I have been ambitious!" cried Di, almost fiercely, "and what have my ambitions led me to? I have made success my fetich, and here I stand—a failure confessed! If you people here had not been so true—so good—so old-fashioned, as I used to call it, you would have treated me as others have done, and I should be a wanderer again, seeking for fresh amusement, fresh ambitions. Oh, I have had enough of that—I wash my hands of it!" She made an expressive gesture as she spoke. "I want to learn the old ways. I want a home—I want love—the love of a true, good man's heart. Everything else may go! I don't know how it began; I don't know when I first began to know. I think I fought it

down, or ignored it for a while ; but it has been too strong for me, and now I can't fight any longer ; I don't want to. Only, sometimes I have been in despair about it ; for you know what he is, and what he thinks of himself, and that he is poor and I am rich. But if he had not a penny, and if I knew he had not a year to live, I would beg for his love on my bended knees, if women were allowed to do such things—just that I might be with him always to the last, and have the right to call myself by his name, and mourn for him when he was taken away. But he won't understand ; he can only think of me as an accomplished flirt. Oh ! I have brought it on myself ; I deserve it. But sometimes I think my heart will break."

Sir Humphrey's face was very thoughtful, and he stood stroking his moustache in meditative fashion.

"I appreciate the difficulty of the position ; yet I do not think it need be quite insurmountable. For one thing, my dear, though you will not consider it of much importance, Colonel York is going to be a somewhat richer man than he thought."

"For his sake I am glad !" cried Diana eagerly. "How is that ?"

"For one thing, he is to have a pension—not a very large one, but every little helps. Then I am almost certain of getting him some work of a light kind, which can be done mainly in his own house, with visits to London from time to time, and that will add something to his income. Thirdly, I have just signed the papers for making over to him for life this little house of mine.

"You know that I am soon to take up my quarters in Convent House, and I do not want either for this house to stand empty, or for it to be occupied by strangers. I owe my life to York, pooh-pooh it as he may. It was he who first warned me, though I was slow to believe the peril ; and it was he who, step by step, unravelled the plot. I wish to make him

some small return for all he has done for me, and I know that he is attached to this place, and that the life and climate suit him. I am securing at the same time for myself the close proximity of a congenial friend and comrade—killing two birds with one stone. York will not be a wealthy man when all is said and done, but he will have a sufficiency, and—”

“And he must be made to understand how unfair it would be to me if he let my horrid money stand between us!” cried Di. “Oh, Uncle Humphrey, can’t you help us a little? If you think that he cares, and would ask me to marry him if I were poor, can’t you make him see how cruel it would be to spoil my life just because I am rich? I would rather throw all I have into the bottom of the sea!”

Sir Humphrey was smiling now. He answered in fatherly fashion :

“I think no such drastic measure will have to be adopted. If you will make me your ambassador in this matter, my dear, I will see what can be done. But give me time; we must not rush things. Be patient just for a few days longer, and be ready to come when you are sent for.”

Diana flung her arms about his neck in a transport of gratitude.

“I will be ready any hour of the day or night!”

The summons did not come as quickly as her impatience desired; but during that period of waiting she and Esther drew closer together than ever they had done before; and when the message came for her to pay her visit to the soldier, now released from his room, she dashed breathlessly to Esther with the missive, flinging herself down at her feet with a quivering face and dewy eyes.

“Give me your blessing before I go, my darling, my darling!” she cried. “Oh, Esther—tell me once more that you forgive me!—for indeed, indeed, when I did it, I did not know what love was like.”

They clung together, those two loving women—the old and

the young, and there was no need for words on either side. Then Diana sprang to her feet, and was speeding across to Nun's Bower with the fleetness of a mountain roe.

Sir Humphrey met her on the threshold with a smile, but he spoke no word, and the questions she would have asked died away upon her tongue. He took her hand, led her upstairs, and threw open the door of a room where the breath of spring flowers prevailed, and which was flooded by the golden light of an exquisite late February sunset. But she heeded nothing of the surroundings ; her eyes leaped forward to the tall figure, fully and scrupulously dressed, lying back in the great arm-chair beside the fire. She heard the click of the closing door, she saw the movement which indicated the attempt to rise, and the next instant she had traversed the intervening space in a few rapid steps, and was kneeling before him, with his hands fast in her own.

"Oh, Donald, Donald, Donald !" she cried—and then her voice failed her. But she knew that her head was resting against his shoulder—and she was content.

It was as from a great distance that she presently heard his voice speaking.

"Is it really true, Di ? Can it be true ?"

"I do not wonder that you ask," she answered, her face still hidden ; "I sometimes wonder that you, or anybody else, can ever believe that anything about me can be true !"

She felt his clasp tighten about her, and thrilled through every nerve and fibre.

"You did not think I meant that, Di," he said ; and the curious quiet note of authority in his voice soothed her tremors and brought with it a sense of rapturous joy which was a revelation to her even now.

Presently she moved a little farther away that she might look at him. He showed traces of illness yet, and was very gaunt and thin ; but the air of returning health was present, too, and her heart bounded.

"You have made a bad choice, my Di," he said, with a smile, as she studied him with eager, passionate eyes. "You have a sorry specimen of an ugly fellow for your husband. It will be beauty and the beast over again when the good people see us together—"

"Yes, I have frequently called myself a beast," spoke Di, with a kindling smile, "and more than that, our frank friend Sally has bestowed that name upon me before this—as I richly deserved. It will all fit in excellently well!"

He devoured her with his eyes, holding her hands fast. If he had changed somewhat, so had she; but if her beauty were less brilliant and glowing and insistent in character, it had gained immeasurably in sweetness and depth.

"Di, I cannot understand it yet. When was it—how did it begin?" Question so dear to her lover's heart!

"I don't know when it began. Sometimes I think it must have been there—in fits and starts—always. When I really knew—knew without any doubt—was down in the cave, when I saw that shining knife aimed at you. I knew then that if it struck—life would be over for me too!"

"And you saved me—at your own risk! Yet you have called yourself a coward!"

"I have been a coward—gloss it over as you will, that is what I was, and I know the reason why now. I was a coward because I only thought of myself. I did not understand then what love could do. I suppose it is a terribly old-fashioned idea; but there seems no getting out of it. It is love—in one form or another—that is the mainspring and essence of life."

"God is love."

Did York speak those words, or was it some voice in her own heart? Diana did not know, nor did she ask. She looked into his eyes, and he looked into hers, and they were silent and content.

Just as the last of the daylight was paling in the saffron sky, Diana, speeding away from Nun's Bower with glowing face

and eyes that shone like stars in the gathering twilight, ran almost headlong into Sally and Stella as they were coming towards the house in search of news.

"Hullo!" cried Stella, waving her hockey-stick, "and pray, where have you been, and where are you scudding off to now?"

"I have been with—with—Colonel York," answered Di, with an odd little quiver in her voice, "and now I am going back to Esther."

"Why, I was to have been his first visitor!" spoke Stella, with a quick, wondering glance at Di.

The girl turned swiftly upon her, and flung her arms about her neck.

"Don't be jealous, dear, and don't mind if you can help it!" Then she broke into a happy little laugh, and cried, "Oh, Stella—I can't insist, seeing the example I have set you!—but how would you like to call me Auntie Di?"

Then, without waiting for an answer, she fled away into the dusk, leaving the other pair regarding one another with wide, wondering eyes.

Sally was the first to recover herself, and uttered a whoop of joy.

"Oh, my!" she cried, brandishing her stick about her head, "if Di hasn't just gone and got hooked after all, just in the same old-fashioned way as the rest of us!"

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